

## **The next stage of political consumerism: fair representation of foodstyles in markets, government and research.**

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Political consumerism has already some history. It started as a boycott and buycott movement with respect to certain market trends, but nowadays, due to new developments, it should reorient itself towards a next stage. The stage is the recognition that food and food production are a pluralistic public good that is in need of decision-making processes that are based on *fair representation of food and farming styles* in markets, industries, governments and research practices. The right to food is not only the right to fill bellies but more specific to live with food production processes that reflect substantially the various life and food styles.

## **The Gap between Food Producers and Consumers and the Rise of political Consumerism**

In Western Europe, from the 1980s onwards, production and consumption of food has become increasingly politicised. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, one can say that, at least with respect to the ethical values and goals of the food system, there was a large, implicit consensus across various stakeholder communities, including consumers: food was not seen to be a political and ethically controversial issue or a public good. Nothing political could happen with food; the only ethical issue that was at stake was food shortages in various parts of the world mostly due to misdistribution of food. Food was essentially seen as 'fuel' that could be made available for consumption in larger or smaller quantities, and could be unsafe to eat, but consideration was generally given to other issues. This consensus was a mainly result of the food security problems facing Europe in the first half of the 20th century.

One of the first reports on the genetic modification of food products is still written with this paradigmatic background in mind (Polkinghorne report (1994): Ministry of Agriculture: Report of the committee on the Ethics of Genetic Modification and Food Use, London). It is therefore no wonder that the Polkinghorne report only recommends with respect to genetic modification that these food stuffs 'require notification by those seeking to market a novel food of why a copy gene of human origin had been used rather than an alternative'. Next to the total neglect of the ethical issues that could be addressed with genetically modified food, it is also remarkable that this report clearly subscribes to a concept of the consumer which was at that time prevalent: consumers are seen as to be protected with respect to food safety, but in other aspects consumer protection, or at least the provision of information needed by consumers to make an informed choice, is not seen to be necessary. Food is framed as politically and ideologically neutral, and quality is not an issue. There is a very strict division of responsibilities between companies, governments and consumer organisations: the food industry is responsible for food production and organising food choices, the authorities are responsible for guaranteeing the safety of the food, and consumer organisations lobby for food availability and fair access to the food supply for all.

However, since the 1980s, food has become more and more an item on the political agenda. Food catastrophes like BSE, Dioxin, Foot and Mouth Disease and other food safety incidents cause social crises which extend beyond straightforward matters of food safety. They demonstrate the gap which has developed between the locations where consumers shop for, prepare and consume a meal, and the distant

places where (parts or ingredients of) the final food stuffs are produced. This gap between production and consumption not only determines various kinds of ethically unacceptable production practices but also contributes to an increasing feeling of consumer alienation, and a lack of trust by consumers, in the motives of various actors in the food sector.

Policy measures and marketing strategies have contributed to the new awakening of ethical concerns with respect to food production. These phenomena have influenced the emergence of new ethical issues and intuitions, arguments or perspectives. Some (perhaps more cynical) observers would argue that the emergence of food ethics is correlated with the rise of the affluent, middle-class consumer, and has increasingly become the focus of societal debate in order to appease the moral unrest of this group of consumers. Ethics is partly constructed by, and a marketing tool for, organisations which promote specific ethical standards or political agendas, or non-government organisations which protest against the activities of particular multinational companies or methods of food production. Protests of political consumerism have often been limited to some of the usual ethical concerns (for example, animal welfare or fair trade), but at the same time, were sometimes effective. Via boycotts and other protests, consumers have ensured that certain products were taken off the shelves (for example, oranges from apartheid South Africa) and others were put on the shelf (for example, products produced using fair trade practices; Friedman, 1999).

An important new wave of political consumerism started with the campaign of industry to get Genetically Modified crops (GMO) on the market in the nineties. Perceptions regarding the risks for society, and potential usefulness of applications play the most important role in the consumer rejection or acceptance of GM foods and crops. This implies that consumer benefits are the most important factors in determining whether GM crops are accepted or not. Price is not often mentioned as a factor contributing to consumer decision-making. In addition, less than 50% of Europeans report high levels of trust in governments (Eurobarometer, 2002). One interesting trend is the requirement of localisation of global developments, which implies that local food production and distribution (*terroir* as it is called in France) has gained importance in both food production and consumer policies (Winter, 2004). This trend of preference for food supplied locally is probably connected with the broader trend of increasing diversification of various food styles and the corresponding farming and production styles. The emergence of GM food, at least in Europe, gave rise to the distinction between GM and non-GM crops, foods and food ingredients, and resulted in all kinds of regulations relating to their coexistence in the food chain. Coexistence policies already existed between organic and non-organic productions styles, and it can be predicted that more types of styles (like healthy eating) need to be included by coexistence schemes (Kriflik and Yeatman, 2005).

Political consumerism also paid more and more attention to trends within the food sector like the phenomenon of mergers of smaller food companies into larger ones, and the formation of global food chains with the concomitant development of the globalisation of markets. Outsourcing, seeking international sources of food ingredients, and implementing control of production processes (even if national legislation in the country of production on, for example, food safety is insufficient), is quite normal for the larger European retailers (Reardon et al., 2001). Longer supply chains and connections, the rapid fragmentation of ingredient sourcing (e.g., herbs from Kenya, conservation stuffs from Canada, soy sauce from India and so on being used in the same product), and increased processing of ingredients make these

chains increasingly vulnerable to various kinds of contamination (Lang and Heasman, 2004). Last but not least, the technologies applied to food production and conservation are rapidly progressing, resulting in an increase in novel processed foods, about which consumers are insufficiently informed. In addition, there is increased uncertainty regarding the extent to which producers respond to consumer concerns and preferences.

One can not say that political consumerism has indeed bridged the gap between producers and consumers; on the contrary, thanks to these developments, the gap is even increasing, although concerns about this gap are also rocketing. Elicited by these developments, various ideologies, worldviews and lifestyles are expressed in various forms of political consumerism, which implies that there is not one form of political consumerism.

### **Ethical arguments against and in favour of political consumerism**

Political consumerism of food has met several types of opposition. There are at least three positions that militate against consumers having a voice in the food market. On the one hand, we have the position promoted by the Chicago school of economy that postulates that the market should be value free and the consumer always has sufficient information and skills to make appropriate consumption choices. On the other hand, there is the alternative position that the consumer must always be protected against negative or inappropriate choices by the state. In the latter case, the consumer is seen as a passive person with insufficient knowledge to make up his or her own mind, a person often in debt and as a consequence in need of protection from greedy producers (Reisch, 2004). The third argument which militates against consumer sovereignty mirrors the first position and stresses the need of governmental interventions in markets. It proposes consumer sovereignty a 'dead end street,' as consumers will always be utilitarian maximisers of their own private utility (for example, by buying cheaper foods) and therefore will always follow their own private interests and preferences, which means that the protection of political values like animal welfare and sustainability should only be conducted by governments (Gaskell, 2002). In all of these three cases sharp distinction is made between the citizen and the consumer: in this case, the citizen should be the main actor that influences politics by voting, thus contributing to the political issues that are left over by the markets and consumers.

The conceptual and empirical evidence for these three critical views to political consumerism is not very impressive (Korthals, 2004). Firstly, markets are never value free, because norms of trust and decency (like keeping to an agreed contract) are always more or less upheld by markets. Secondly, although some consumers (for example, children) are particularly vulnerable, many consumers are able to shape their opinions regarding products, in particular given the rise of new knowledge systems such as the Internet and widespread education. However, knowledge is always incomplete, both for consumers and for producers and regulators.

Thirdly, many consumer NGOs have noted that consumers are collectively mobilising on public interest issues over and beyond their private, short-term interests. This is also demonstrated by recent governmental and industrial interest in consumer concerns regarding food production. So the concept of the rational, profit maximising, egoistic, economic consumer is losing ground as a description of consumer behaviour and thought, but also as a theoretical construct. Fourthly, the distinction between consumers, who are buying goods, versus citizens, who vote for policies, is rather problematic in the field of food consumption. Empirically, there is

only one human being that shops and prepares his or her food, and votes or contributes in other ways to the political process. The preferences in shopping cannot be disconnected from political preferences. Moreover, from a conceptual point of view, this distinction between consumer and citizen is not useful in the field of food because the existence of consumer concerns makes it clear that consumers think that the existing political process of regulating and enabling food production is insufficient to take into account consumer views on animal welfare and other concerns.

### **Political consumerism: from consumer concerns to fair representation**

As early as 1962, the Kennedy government appealed to the rights of consumers in a rather broad way in the Bill of Consumers Rights (Reisch, 2004), which was incorporated into the EU consumer policy programme. These rights were: the right to safety; the right to be informed; the right to choose, the right to be heard; the right to representation; and the right to adequate and legal protection. After the Rio Convention (1992), in which the overall importance of sustainable production was agreed upon by most nations, and the formation of the European single market, the ethical consumer and diverse consumer concerns came to prominence. However, their concerns are multiple and often ambiguous.

With respect to all these concerns it should be borne in mind that consumers differ in their ethical orientations, attitudes and purchasing behaviours. There are different types of consumers, and their choice between potentially conflicting values differs accordingly. Different weighing models and types of information are used for making choices. The same applies to producers: their value orientations and attitudes differ enormously across Europe. Attempts to re-establish trust should at least take into account the pluralism of consumers' vis-à-vis their different ethical orientations, viewpoints, and way of balancing their preferred values.

These diverse forms of political consumerism make one thing clear: food is politics and even a certain form of public good (Korthals 2008). When food is indeed a multi-interpretable public good (which in no way precludes that food can be produced and traded by market parties) one can infer that the organisation of food in its broadest sense nowadays lacks representation of the various food styles. Political consumerism has to take a next step and to bring into the food networks fair representation of food styles. All the earlier mentioned problems are an immediate consequence of the misrepresentation of this multi-interpretable public good exerted by one dominant food style. Due to misrepresentation there are these difficult ideological struggles about food, the power play of one or a few dominant forces that want to colonize food styles with one peculiar foodstyle (that of food as fuel, or fast food) in sectors like research and governance, the constant marginalization of different foodstyles other than the fast food style, and the institutional channelling towards intensive, upscaling bio industries. The expression 'hunger is the best sauce' is one of most disturbing lies that conceal that even hungry people have their food style preferences.

Lack of pluralism and representation is often difficult to identify. It means something like misrepresentation, which in the food sector would mean that not all food styles are represented on the market and in research: some styles have no voice and some have more voice. This implies that the right on food choice of collectives or individuals is not respected. Lack of pluralism is undeniably connected with the concept of food quality. This multi- interpretable concept is defined by different cultures in various ways. Quality of food is for a Moslem different for a Hindu

or a Jewish person, to name only the largest and broadest lifestyle groups. There are also differences between different European nations and cultures (Rozin et al., 1999).

The question of what type of food to choose, and why, is at first instance (prima facie) amenable to the decision of the individual citizen/consumer. As Kant says, it is so easy to let someone else decide, and ethically seen there is no justification to let someone else be your keeper in choosing your food (on the basis of paternalism). However, in fact, consumers strive for commonalities. So, food choices are not exclusively individual choices and autonomy has collective aspects: autonomy is practiced in life styles and food styles.

### **Fair representation of food styles in markets, governments, and industry and research practices**

The organisation of representations of food styles in these different practices is not easy. Two main problems are how these representations should be organized and how to make representations auditable. Usually, representations are done by organizing and mobilizing communicative political power, mostly around certain issues. The gap between producers and consumers is such a multi-layered and broad issue, that it can motivate many to take part in a searching and learning process how to embed the alienated food network again in their daily life. It is not necessary that representation goes along national or regional party lines. Coalitions and parties concentrating on local food production in cities, on new city-rural communities, on global-local links, on adoption of farmers elsewhere and many others are possible.

The issue of controllable, responsible and auditable representations are as important as their increasing influence in the current food networks. Transparency, reporting, clever webcamming and using other itc mechanisms can make a difference. Regularly rotation, clear decision making processes, regularly back reporting and back calling are some other mechanisms. These are learning and searching processes, however, so in advance one can not devise decisive procedures for fair and auditable representations of food styles in the food networks.

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