

1 Introduction:

Toward a cultural analysis of labelling systems

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One of the most striking developments in late-modern consumer culture has been the mushrooming of a chequered spectrum of product certification labels. Labels tell us that a beer on the supermarket shelf is made of organically grown ingredients. They inform us that a brand of coffee owes its higher price to the fact that it has been fairly traded. They make us aware which washing machine consumes less energy, and will thus help us to reduce our personal footprint on the global climate. They ensure us that the Teddy bear that we buy for our newborn nephew does not contain any harmful chemicals. They tell us if the managers of the holiday park in which we spend our vacation takes care of the local natural environment. There is rarely any kind of product for which not one or more labels exist, which indicate some truth about its safe functioning, environmental friendliness, healthiness or socially just production.

The student papers that are published in this report probe the proliferation of product labels from a cultural science perspective, and thereby aim to contribute to a critical public debate on this development. Instead of seeing labels as conveyors of neutral technical information that provide consumers with a rational base for their market decisions, they seek to “open the black box” of labelling. What have been the guiding economic and political narratives through which labelling has been promoted and legitimised as a technology of market governance? Which institutions and actors have been involved in the process of labelling and how have they shaped the scope and content of labelling information? How do labels achieve and maintain trust among their target audiences? And finally, how do targeted firms as well as consumers “read” labels and integrate them into their own action repertoires and moral identities?

The labelling wave

The surface of products and their packaging material is widely used to convey all kinds of textual messages such as brand names, logos, claims of quality or lists of ingredients. Many countries have also issued regulations that force producers to convey product information to the consumer (e.g. of the fat content of foodstuff). When we talk about labelling in this report we refer to a more specific type of labels. These are standardised symbols – typically seal-like visual icons, sometimes with the name or an abbreviation of that label on it – that come with the claim that the product fulfils a certain set of evaluation criteria. These labels can relate to very different aspects of product qualities or “focal values” as we refer to it here (e.g. fairness or environmental friendliness of the production and trading process). They are granted by institutionalised labelling systems that stipulate the evaluative criteria, organise the testing and auditing processes and that promote the label within a producer sector as well as to the public. How such labelling systems are organised can vary widely. Some are state owned public institutions or quasi-governmental organisations. Others are related to civil society organisations that have set up their own labels. Again, others are owned by firms or producer organisations that seek to associate their products with a certain focal value. Even when such labelling systems pursue the same or overlapping focal values, they can differ significantly with regards to the standards that they apply and the resonance that they find within their target audiences.

Although it has been only recently that labelling systems have become a pervasive feature of consumer culture, the technique of labelling has evolved throughout a much longer historical process. The first labelling system concerned mainly the quality of a product in terms of its authentic way of production or its geographical origin. An early example was the *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlé* (AOC), a seal issued by the French government in 1905 to certify the regional origin of wines and later cheeses. Other national versions of the label were later adopted in many other countries throughout Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria). Another early labelling system is represented by the quality stars for restaurants that have been granted by the editors of the Michelin travelling guide since 1926. In Germany it was mostly producer networks of beekeepers (1925) and winemakers (German 1950) that issued their first quality labels. Even in 1928 the anthroposophically oriented farmers’ network Demeter already established the first organic food labelling

system in Germany.¹ With the exception of Demeter which was based in a very peculiar cosmological worldview, the focal value of these early labelling systems linked the qualities of a product (“good taste”) to a preoccupation with matters of authenticity, purity, and, at least implicitly, national belonging. Thus the German honey label required that the product was made by German beekeepers and the latter had followed a strict protocol that banned supposedly “inauthentic” practices, such as heat treatment, adding taste enhancing sugar and other additives and that stipulated a limit for the water content of the honey. Such labels that cherish assumptions about the authenticity or ‘naturalness’ of a product in terms of place and or production processes have remained an important segment of the contemporary labelling landscape. These labels still play a role in contemporary consumer culture. Notably in 1992, the European Union issued a regulation that sought to harmonise the certification of protected designation of origin and protected geographical indication in its different member states.²

It was since around the late 1970s, that at least European and North-American societies witnessed a rapid increase of labelling systems. This was largely linked to the rise of new problem agendas that preoccupied the broader public and political movements, such as health problems, environmental pollution or the concern for global justice. The new labelling systems evolved along with other political initiatives and everyday practices that revolved around these topics. These public problems or aspects thereof became the base from which focal values for these labelling systems were derived. Although the preoccupations with authenticity sometimes remained connected to them (as for example the association of organic food with certain regional farming practices), they were increasingly based on more abstract and science-based criteria of evaluation, such as chemical tests or the so-called Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) of the environmental impact of product fabrication processes.

One of the main focal values of labelling systems has been environmental friendliness. This means that a label is supposed to enable consumers to choose between products that are more or less harmful to the environment and thereby to promote the use of

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- 1 Anthroposophy was a metaphysical system of thought invented by the Austrian Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) which had been popular in the German middle class in the 1920s. Anthroposophy cherished a spiritualist and holistic world-view, and manifested itself in new practices of architecture, schooling, dancing, healing and farming. In contrast to later forms of organic agriculture, anthroposophic or “bio-dynamic” agriculture did not only ban the use of industrial fertilizers and pesticides. It was also guided by cosmological assumptions about the interconnectedness of man, biological life, the earth, and the universe.
 - 2 Council regulation (EC) No 510/2006 of March 2006 on the protection of geographical indications and designations of origin for agricultural products and foodstuffs.

greener production technologies. After the first eco-label, the so-called Blue Angel, had been launched by the West German state in 1978, it soon became the model for similar initiatives in other countries (see Wurzel 2004; Savadkouhi, this volume) and at the EU-level. In addition to such general eco-labels, which are applied for all kinds of product categories, a number of sector specific labelling systems have emerged that focus on the supposed environmental friendliness or sustainability of specific, often politically contested domains of production (e.g. fishing, timber production in rainforest) or kinds of environmental impacts (e.g. energy consumption).

Concerns with the environment as well with individual ill/health and well-being are also the focal value of the many organic food labels that have mushroomed since the 1980s. Such labels are meanwhile not only issued by farmers' communities, but also by supermarket chains, NGOs and state institutions. They intend to secure both a more environmentally friendly way of doing agriculture and a healthier and tastier product for the consumer. As with the eco-label, the European Union has meanwhile also issued its own seal for organic food.³ Furthermore, a growing concern with allergies and other specific health issues has led to the launch of specific labelling systems for concerned consumer groups.

It was in the wake of political discussions of economic disparities on the world-system that in the late 1980s the first fair-trade label was founded in the Netherlands (Max Havelaar). The system labelled products that were produced by smaller farmers and according to certain social standards, and thus sought to guarantee the producer a certain minimum price. Thereby Fair Trade labels were supposed to allow producers to opt for a product that was more expensive than a regular product, thereby supporting the producers in developing countries. As with other environmental and organic food labels fair trade has become a widespread sector of the labelling field.

Exploring the cultural politics of product labelling

The rise of labelling practices has meanwhile also become the object of a considerable amount of economics and political science scholarship. Much of this work has described product labels as a “soft” and market-oriented instrument of governance that allows policy-makers to pursue political programmemes in a more flexible and adaptive way than traditional

3 Council regulation (EC) No 834/2007 of 28 June 2007.

state-based forms of political regulation. For example, scholars of environmental politics Jordan et. al. (2003; 2007) see them – alongside eco-taxes, tradable emission permits, and voluntary agreements – as token of a new arsenal of “New Environmental Policy Instruments” (NEPIs). Accordingly, they are supposed to complement or even replace the “command-and-control” approach of traditional environmental policy. Likewise, advocates of “ecological modernization” have cherished labelling as an effective means of ‘greening’ producer and consumer practices, thereby moving beyond the widespread assumption of a fundamental antagonism between industrial development and environmentalism (Spaargaren 2005). Empirical research from these angles has sought to shed light on the processes that have led to the choice of labelling as a policy instrument. Additionally, shedding light on its shaping by different national policy systems and the extent to which such instruments have fulfilled the expectations of their advocates (Jordan et. al. 2003).

Whereas concepts of labelling as policy-instruments are mainly interested in the relative efficiency of this instrument, others have discussed labelling in terms of its possible contribution to a democratic civil society (Micheletti 2003, Michelletti/Føllesdal 2003; 2007; Schudson 2007, Klintman 2009). For example, the Swedish political scientist Michele Michelletti maintains that the rise of product labelling is representative of a new public virtue that she calls political consumerism. Accordingly, people increasingly “make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (Micheletti 2003: 2). Next to politically motivated consumer boycotts this includes the orientations of consumers on the base of labelling and other certification schemes. For Michelletti such deliberate consumer choices constitute a form of “individualised political action” that complements the “collective political action” of traditional social movements as well as the formal democratic election system. As she posits, it mirrors the transition towards a “reflexive modernity” in which, as Ulrich Beck (1997) has prominently argued, political life has increasingly formed part of an informal “subpolitics” that transgresses the confinements of traditional political formations and commitments. In line with such considerations, empirical work on product labelling has thus been mainly concerned with the various ways in which civic society debates actually guide consumers’ actions and how they have been involved in the establishment and shaping of labelling systems.⁴ Besides optimistic views of the politically empowering role

4 For example Michelletti used the case of the Swedish label “good environmental choice” to show how civil society organization (in this case a nation-wide Swedish conservation association) have set-up their own labelling scheme as a reaction to perceived shortcomings of official environmental state policy (Michelletti 2003, 119-148). See also Klintman’s (2009) discussion of labelling as a form of ‘deliberative democracy’.

of labelling, it has also led to more critical views that emphasise the structural limitations of political consumerism, and more specifically of labelling systems.⁵

Considerations of the potential role of labelling in governance and of its link to civil society also figure in the contributions to this volume. What however sets this volume apart from many other studies in this field is its basic understanding of labelling as a nexus of cultural practice and politics.⁶ Labels, in our understanding do not simply represent pre-given essential properties of products, nor do they function as a purely technical means of fulfilling predefined policy-goals. They rather frame these products in historically and locally situated ways and thereby (re-)mediate the social relations between policy-makers, producers, and consumers. Rather than seeking to provide straightforward answers to the question of the 'efficiency' of labels in governance processes, we will attend in an almost microscopic manner to the practices through which such new 'focal values' are articulated. Furthermore, how they are packaged and standardised in labelling procedures, and how all of this becomes associated with certain products and consumer practices. As will become clear from the following studies this is largely a multi-arena process that includes administrative cultures of regulatory institutions, the organisational practices of companies, courtroom activities as well as the everyday life of ordinary citizen-consumers. In all of these arenas actors constructively shape the content of labelling practices either by adding new sets of meanings or by appropriating received concepts, narratives and institutional procedures in locally selective and inventive ways.

What we call labelling systems here are not so much stable technical or legal entities but dynamic configurations of practices in which technical, legal and other meanings are invented, shaped, negotiated and contested. Labelling systems in our understanding are therefore cultural in the most basic sense, pertaining to human collectives' "self spawn webs of meaning", to use Clifford Geertz' (1973) famous expression. At the same time, they are also political, as their meanings and the processes in which they are constituted are tied to and constitutive of relations of power. This is not only the case with the potential

5 For example Johnson (2008) has drawn on a qualitative analysis of whole foods markets to show a number of inherent tensions in the supposed "citizen-consumer"-position that advocates of political consumerism have assumed. In a study of French organic agriculture Dubuisson-Quellier and Lamine (2008) have characterized labelling as merely "delegating" political responsibility and thereby distinguished it from stronger forms of consumer participation or "empowerment" as they are realized, according to the authors, in some local food cooperatives.

6 For other studies that have probed labeling from a cultural and ethnographic perspective see Eden's (2008) account on forest certification-practices and Hébert's (2010) case-study on the change of Alaskan fisherman-practices in the wake of sustainable salmon certification.

empowerment of consumers, in the sense of Michelletti's political consumerism, but also concerns the shifting positions of regulatory institutions, industry companies, and civil society organisation and their relations to each other, to the label and to the certified product. It is these emerging political and cultural worlds that form the focus of our analyses.⁷

This implies that we have opted for a context sensitive research methodology in all contributions. This includes mainly qualitative interviews with participants and qualitative content or discourse analysis of archival and published documents. Although none of the following chapters are based on a fully-fledged ethnographic field-study, some of them include direct observations that were made occasionally by their respective authors. Another consequence of our focus on cultural practice is a certain modesty with regards to generic generalisation about labelling policies. Our volume does not seek to provide some sort of overarching theory of labelling. It rather seeks to display the diversity that exists among and within labelling systems; a diversity that most likely escapes simplified attempts at generalisation. However, in structuring their analyses the authors make use of a number of heuristic concepts, among them those discussed in this introduction, and others that are taken from recent social studies of science on knowledge production and standardisation as well as work on the social construction of credibility.

Structure of the volume

Our chapters trace the development and the practice of labelling systems or aspects, focusing mainly on examples in Germany, the Netherlands, the European Union and to a smaller extent Belgium. This partly reflects the geographical location of Maastricht, the Netherlands, where the student research project has taken place. However, with regards to the topics, it is due to our attempt to cover a range of different types of labelling systems as well as arenas in which labelling is relevant.

The first two chapters focus on the historical genesis of two of the most important eco-labels. In chapter 2, Roya Savadkouhi traces the development of the German Blue Angel from its launch in 1978 to the present. This label is usually regarded as the first

7 By seeing labelling systems as a nexus of culture and politics our volume forms part of a general "cultural turn" that has taken place in the study of economy and market processes (e.g. Preda, Knorr-Cetina, MacKenzie) and specifically consumerism (Everts/Jackson 2009; Miller et al. 1998).

eco-label, and due to setting a benchmark for further labelling systems, can be seen as a most significant process of policy innovation. The chapter does not only provide an important historical backdrop for the understanding of eco-labelling in general. In tracing the development of the institutional procedures and technical content of the labelling system through different periods, the author shows how the focal value of this system; the friendliness of a product to the environment, has been translated into a standardised system of evaluation. For example, this concerns how environmental friendliness was conceived of discursively but also how it was translated into various criteria of evaluation. The author demonstrates that this has been a highly dynamic process, which has not only reflected the technicalities of industrial production, but also conflicts among vested interests. Additional factors can be considered, such as legal obligations and issues, the need to adapt to technological innovations and the emergence of new issues at the agenda of environmental policy.

The third chapter dives more systematically into the technicalities of appraisal and evaluation on which these and other eco-labels are based. Merlin Münch focuses particularly on the method on Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) that has evolved out of the business contexts of the 1970s, which then became increasingly appropriated in various environmental labelling systems in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. By tracing the environmental impact from “cradle to grave” LCA promises to provide a rational and scientific sound base for the selection of environmentally friendly products. As the author shows, the trajectory of this method and its mode of operation has been characterised by a notorious tension between the goal of stipulating universal methodological standards on the one hand, and the need to adapt methods to different national contexts. Drawing on insights from constructivist sociology of science, the author interprets this not as a failure of the methods, but as an example for the profound and unavoidable local embeddedness of techno-scientific standards.

The issue of standardisation and its ambivalent relationship with local contexts is also the topic of Tobias Kirchhoff’s and Johanna Richter’s chapter on the appropriation of eco-labels by business. They use these considerations to shed light on the tensions and dilemmas that are implied in the decision-making of firms for the application of eco-labels. Using the example of the EU-eco-label, they probe the dynamics of interaction through which a firm opts for product labelling, how it prepares for an application and how approval or rejection is negotiated with the responsible regulatory authority. Again, they show how abstract standards of evaluation are re-interpreted and modified by local actors to make them fit with the institutional context in which they operate. This does not only provide valuable insights into the dynamics of standardisation, it also sheds fresh light on the issue of policy-implementation of European environmental initiatives.

In chapter 5 Mira Knauf turns to fair-trade to reflect about wider cultural implications of product labelling. As she argues, fair-trade has emerged within a small politicised sub-culture in the 1980s, but since that time evolved to a widespread concern of middle class consumers. This mainstreaming of fair-trade however was not only a success of the political movement that initiated this labelling practice. It also reflected a broader “paradigm shift” in the understanding of fair-trade by its administrators and consumers. As Knauf argues, the history of the label thereby also dovetails with a broader trend in consumer culture to mobilise product choice as iconic markers of social and personal identities.

The last two chapters focus on the use of labelling systems in the sector of organic food production. Birgit Gall and Tamara Wörner advance the notion of “political producerism” to refer to the active promotion of political and ethical values by certain networks of producer, a concept that they interpret as a direct complement of Michelletti’s notion of political consumerism. In order to understand the practices through which political producerism operates in the organic food sector, they compare three organic food labelling systems in Germany. Thereby focusing particularly on the “credibility tools” through which the networks of producers, who are related to the label, communicate their political messages and quality claims to their consumer audience. As they show, the three labelling systems employ quite different tools of credibility which all have different strengths and limits and which represent different styles of political producerism.

Whereas Gall and Wörner focus on the mechanisms through which political producers communicate their labels to their target audience, Louisa Weiss approaches this problem from the consumer’s side. On the base of qualitative interviews with grocery shoppers in Germany, she traces some of the interpretative practices through which consumers make sense of labels, the labelled product and their own shopping decisions. As Weiss argues, rationalist concepts of consumer choice can only grasp the dynamics of such practices in a superficial way. Drawing on the notion of “tactics”, as coined by the French social philosopher Michel de Certeau, she argues that grocery shopping has a profoundly tactical character. This means that consumers in deciding for or against a labelled product do not simply realise pre-conceived plans or attitudes. Instead their consumer practices are emergent lines of action that are guided by opportunistic moves and the need to artfully balance contradictory demands. It is this through these tactics of shopping that they reframe or reinvent the meaning of labels and the labelled products that they decide to buy or not to buy.

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