

# The Ethics of Consumption

Per Sandin<sup>1</sup> · Helena Röcklinsberg<sup>2</sup>

Accepted: 19 November 2015 / Published online: 10 December 2015  
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

Very few of us who read this text are likely to live self-sufficiently. We buy things. Some of these things are essential to our continued survival (like medication). Others contribute to a reasonably comfortable life (like central heating or functional clothing). Perhaps, those of us who can afford it at least occasionally buy some outright luxuries—like that new carbon-fiber race bike used for joyrides, another pair of beautiful shoes, or an exquisite dinner. In a word, we are consumers.

However, our buying is not without consequences. Take our food choices, for instance. While arguably remarkably productive, the present industrial system for agriculture and food production involves a number of detrimental consequences for human health, the environment, and animal welfare. Great challenges lie ahead.

It is frequently argued that key to meeting those challenges is changing consumption patterns among individual as well as institutions, for instance through reducing meat consumption, switching to organic or fair trade products, boycotting or ‘buycotting’ certain products, minimizing waste or reducing overall consumption. There is considerable disagreement regarding how to bring this about, whose responsibility it is (Meisch 2013; Raterman 2012), and even whether it is desirable. Is it a question of political initiatives, the virtues and vices of individual consumers in the developed world (Gambrel and Cafaro 2010), or something else? Thus, the ethics of consumption—ethical consumption, ‘consumer ethics’, and so on—is one of the most interesting current themes in agricultural and food ethics

---

✉ Helena Röcklinsberg  
Helena.Rocklinsberg@slu.se

<sup>1</sup> Department of Crop Production Ecology, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, P.O. Box 7043, 750 07 Uppsala, Sweden

<sup>2</sup> Department of Animal Environment and Health, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, P.O. Box 7068, 750 07 Uppsala, Sweden

(Papaioikonomou et al. 2011). It was therefore chosen as the main theme for the 11th Congress of the European Society of Agricultural and Food Ethics (EurSafe), which was held in Uppsala, Sweden, in pleasant early autumn weather in September 2013.

The ethics of consumption was approached along three sub-themes: The Citizen, The Market, and The Law.

The theme of *The Citizen* recognizes that the roles of citizen and consumer are in several respects different. Through market economy focus has been on individuals' actions (such as consumer decisions) and choice of lifestyle as the way forward, rather than on political and collective solutions. Recently focus has shifted and the latter have been taken more into consideration. Both ways raise questions about roles and responsibilities. Is there any significant difference between a 'food consumer' and a 'food citizen'? Do we need to contextualize our expectations of the ethical consumer with regard to culture, tradition, religion, political system, and so on or would we rather opt for a universal 'food citizen' codex? Is there a general balance point between consumer freedom and political solutions with regard to animal welfare or environmental sustainability, or should it be formulated for each single issue?

The ethics of consumption is arguably situated the midst of the economic realities like free trade and its barriers, agricultural subsidies, consumer expectations and preferences, labelling and 'glocalness' and so called organic alternatives—*The Market*. Given two main trends in food marketing—globalization on the one hand, and strive for localization or regional or traditional food markets on the other—the issue of ethical consumption becomes closely related to understanding content and impacts of the tension between a variety of interests and ethical aspects. What is the role of retailers, producers and transport chains and waste processing in this tension? How are we to create efficient communication built on trust in the junction of economic factors, politics and human action as regards food consumption? What is the contribution of schemes like CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), certification systems and fair trade to a dialogue between these actors?

In the light of an increasing strive for ethical consumption the role, limits and possibilities of *The Law* are put to the fore. Traditionally legislation sets a minimum level, partly due to respect for cultural differences. However, globalization has promoted a movement towards deregulation of the food market and therefore both national and international institutions find it difficult to develop intervention tools that can reorient the food market. Is the role of legislation to drive a change in consumer and market behavior? How is this related to values such as freedom of choice, global food security, and animal welfare? To what extent can legislation mirror 'the' public view changing over time? How to value public participation in the development of food policies and legislation? Who defines what constitutes 'good' food legislation and what are its foundational values?

These considerations were explored from very different angles by participants at the EurSafe Congress in Uppsala. In addition to about one hundred regular presentations and posters, the conference contained, among other things, a special session with a panel discussion on ethical trade and motivation in sustainability labeling. In the spirit of EurSafe's inviting different stakeholders in the discussion on agricultural and food ethics, we also arranged a public panel discussion on the

theme “Ethics for sale?” during which five invited speakers from academia, certification bodies and companies with an ethical profile discussed a set of questions on responsibilities for sustainable products with the audience consisting of conference delegates and citizens of the Uppsala. EurSafe conferences have a tradition of gathering academics from various disciplines covering a wide range, from natural science to theology. The Uppsala conference was no exception in this respect and for instance marine biologists, ethologists and veterinarians, economists and sociologists as well as ethicists with a background in philosophy and theology participated.

Over 115 papers presented at the conference have been printed in the Conference Volume (Röcklinsberg and Sandin 2013). Since space is very limited, we invited a number of contributors whose papers were both of excellent quality and representative of some particularly interesting topics from the conference themes to develop their thought in some more depth. We are very pleased to present their work in this special issue, following a loose line form elaborating on the choices and responsibilities of each individual to a broader scope of included aspects. Papers are chosen to contribute to an overall picture of the discussion of the consumer-citizen debate regarding responsibility for global food situation.

Karin Nordström and Jo Goossens focus on the individual choice of healthy or ‘ethical’ food in a novel way. They discuss how ethical issues of personalized nutrition can be considered through the capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum. They use four scenarios of possible future European health and nutrition policies with two variables: the ‘logic of health care systems’ and ‘conception of health’ while analyzing the compatibility between personalized health nutritional advice and the minimum of entitlements required by the capabilities approach.

Angela Kallhoff takes on the notion of consumer citizenship. She argues that it is to be understood in the context of the discussion of qualified notions of citizenship. These should include also for instance ecological citizenship to mirror the interdependence of individuals and nature. Duties and rights receive a distinct shape when debated in terms of ‘consumer citizenship’, and consumer citizens have both limited freedoms and a range of duties.

Mimi E. Lam is concerned with companies’ ethical assessment, exemplified by the fish industry. She develops a new tool to assess the value chain in terms of sustainability by combining a version of the ethical matrix with Rapfish, an appraisal technique along a number of modalities like ecology, social and ethical aspects. Lam shows that such an in-depth analysis can give a comprehensive picture of issues at stake on a certain fishery site in a way that creates insight in possible improvements. Moreover, based on case studies Lam, in a normative turn, argues that all involved stakeholders (from legislators to those responsible for labelling incentives) need to contribute better to sustainable and ethically justified seafood systems.

Frauke Pirscher elaborates on consumer possibilities and responsibilities, with focus on labelling of animal products related to welfare standards. She criticizes the idea of market driven instruments to solve animal welfare impairments, as it rests on prevailing normative judgements of people’s preferences, imply a certain set of values including distribution of rights which can only confirm treatment of animals

as commodities, rather than increase respect for them for their own sake. Based on such criticism of classical institutional economics, Pirscher argues that a welfare label does not mirror the lexicographical ordering of preferences among people who regard animals as having rights or whose interests are to be taken into ethical consideration. A thorough societal debate on the level of legal welfare standards is needed in order to raise the issue of whether or not animals are more than mere commodities.

Mickey Gjerris, Christian Gamborg and Henrik Saxe discuss the complexity of the concept of sustainability in the context of food choices. Against this background they are skeptical of the idea of critical consumerism given the responsibility for sustainable consumption possibilities and argue for complementing society's reliance on critical consumerism with a citizen-oriented and political process in support of making more sustainable food choices.

For the last paper of this Issue we have invited Gunnar Rundgren, writer with a background in sustainable farming, and invited speaker to the EurSafe 2013 satellite event 'Ethics for Sale?' in order to mirror EurSafe conferences' tradition to create a meeting point for academia, governmental bodies, NGOs and practitioners. Similar to Pirscher and Gjerris et al., but approaching the issue from a slightly more practical angle and through a number of global examples, Rundgren is critical to the current system of market driven forces to reach sustainability or justice in food distribution. By referring to three mega drivers causing today's unsustainable situation he elaborates on why market forces (e.g. free choice of purchase or mitigating through internalization of costs) are insufficient. Instead, Rundgren argues for fundamentally rethinking our role as citizens by seeking solutions in re-localization of food production and de-commodification of plants and farm animals.

The discussion on the ethics of consumption has only just started, and the literature is growing. We are convinced that the contributions in this special issue will provide thought-provoking starting points for taking this discussion further.

**Acknowledgments** We are most grateful to the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, The Swedish Research council Formas and Destination Uppsala for financial support of the conference, as well as for contributions in scientific and practical matters by colleagues and students engaged in arranging the conference.

## References

- Gambrel, J., & Cafaro, P. (2010). The virtue of simplicity. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 23, 85–108.
- Meisch, S. (2013). Green food consumption: whose responsibility? In H. Röcklinsberg & P. Sandin (Eds.), *The ethics of consumption: The citizen, the market and the law* (pp. 160–165). Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers.
- Papaoikonomou, E., Ryan, G., & Valverde, M. Mapping. (2011). Ethical consumer behavior: Integrating the empirical research and identifying future directions. *Ethics & Behaviour*, 21(3), 197–221.
- Raterman, T. (2012). Bearing the weight of the world: on the extent of an individual's environmental responsibility. *Environmental Values*, 21(4), 417–436.
- Röcklinsberg, H., & Sandin, P. (Eds.). (2013). *The ethics of consumption. The citizen, the market, and the law*. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers.