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Abstract: Green Consumerism through Green Labelling?

This abstract refers to the introductory chapter in a forthcoming book with the preliminary title *Tools for Trust: Eco-Standards towards a Greener and more Democratic Consumer Society?*, which is written by Magnus Boström and Mikael Klintman.

The introductory chapter starts by contextualising the problem area: Ordinary people are increasingly faced with news about potentially negative consequences of GM-products, contaminations of food, over-fishing, clear-felling of forests, loss of biodiversity, climate change, chemical pollution, as well as many other environmental and health-related risks. As a response to these widespread concerns among the general public – and to a reduced public trust in traditional policies and regulatory arrangements – politicians, state agencies, social movement organisations, business actors, and consumers are increasingly engaged in finding and developing new market-based and consumer-oriented instruments.

Our aim is to analyse the practical *tools* of green consumerism, with a particular focus on green labels (including eco-labels, stewardship certificates, green mutual funds, green trademarks). We are interested in why, and how, such green instruments are produced, introduced, debated, and – in effect – what preconditions they offer in terms of a ‘greening’ and ‘democratisation’ of society. With *green labels*, we refer to markers, which are visible to consumers or professional purchasers, and which are assumed to help distinguish environmentally beneficial consumer choices from ‘conventional’ ones.

By acknowledging knowledge uncertainties and ideological diversities surrounding standardizations of all kinds, the book aims at moving beyond a rather common focus on consumers’ decision-making processes on the ‘front-stage’ (as in studies of decision making in the store). Instead, this book investigates processes on the ‘back-stage’, ‘behind’ the final label that is placed on the product or service. The chief objective of the book is to analyse and discuss the conditions, opportunities, and dilemmas of green labelling processes specifically, and green consumerism more generally. Our underlying position is that the tools of green consumerism are created and negotiated in several ‘places’ within a broad continuum *between* science and politics. Furthermore, we examine implications of the discrepancy between what is presented to consumers on the front stage (through categorical and over-simplistic ecological messages) and what is actually taking place on the back-stage (where the eco-standards are created and negotiated). The book is aimed at indicating how a bridging of this

gap could be done; and how such a bridging could have clear ecological and democratic benefits.

Our main thesis is that ecologically and democratically effective green consumerism – if this is called for – requires that its tools (and the policy procedures behind them) be designed, modified, and informed about in ways that stimulate a third type of consumer trust (between *simple, unreserved consumer trust in experts* and *excessive public distrust*). This third type we call *reflective trust*. In short, reflective trust is a more ‘mature’ trust, where consumers acknowledge the inherent knowledge fallibility, ideological diversity, and political priorities of environmental policies, but where consumer participation and engagement is nonetheless triggered. Using findings from existing surveys and qualitative research we argue that a great share of political consumers could be described as *reflexive* (i.e., well-educated, interested in politics, somewhat sceptical towards authorities, prepared to revise previous thoughts and choices in light of new information, etc) as well as *ambivalent* and *uncertain* (i.e, unable to know for certain if the choices made really are steps in the right direction). As a consequence, green labels are addressed to people that are able to develop reflective trust; but it is far from evident that back-stage labelling processes actually stimulate such reflective trust. We believe that it is key how debates, dialogue, and reflections in labelling processes are conducted, and for this reason the book examines the *policy context* and the *organizing and framing processes* of labelling. The first chapter introduces these three concepts as general, analytical focal points.

Frame analysis, which concerns policy actors’ construction of interpretative schemes used for knowing, analyzing, persuading, and acting, is particularly useful for understanding debates, reflections, discussions and compromises surrounding green labelling schemes. Frames have the dual function of facilitating the translation of a complex reality to a simple level. At the same time, they should stimulate reflections and enrich debate on a broad array of labelling themes. Such framing aspirations may go in diverging directions. Similarly, the development of particular organisational forms for the labelling may have great impact on the possibility of stimulating constructive dialogue, reflections, and co-operation among actors. But labelling organisations can also effectively exclude actors, such as certain consumer groups, and constrain dialogue.

Our book is embedded within a political sociologist tradition in which the role of the policy context is seen to be important. We are particularly curious to learn why the tools for green consumerism appear to be easier to implement in certain countries and certain sectors, and not in others. Why, for example, are there so many internationally recognized labelling initiatives in a state-centred political culture in Sweden, compared with, for instance, the situation in the US, where we could expect to see ‘more’ of it, due to its distinctive market liberal and consumer-oriented political culture? We use four factors when investigating how the policy context affects labelling processes and debates: (1) The political culture in various countries (or sectors); (2) existing transnational and national regulation and rules; (3) the organizational landscape and market structure; and 4) infrastructure and technology.

Empirically, this book is based on case studies with eco-standardization projects in several sectors and countries. The sectors include forestry, paper products, fishery, organic production and food, GM-food, green and ethical mutual funds, and green electricity. The countries given main attention in the book are the US and Sweden. Moreover, in order to provide a broad, international picture, we make use of extensive, secondary data from other European countries and elsewhere.