

CHAPTER 25

THE POLITICS OF FOOD LABELING AND CERTIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

You are what you eat, the saying goes. The notion that one's food should not only taste good and meet one's dietary needs but should also reflect one's priorities, values, and identity is at the core of the politics of food labeling and certification. A rapidly proliferating array of labels cater to concerns about working conditions in developing countries, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, and health. In today's grocery stores, an environmentalist can purchase tomatoes grown without chemical pesticides, a socially conscious humanitarian can buy coffee grown by farmers guaranteed a minimum price and safe working conditions, and a health-concerned parent can select a cut of meat from animals that never ingested growth hormones. These so-called "ethical consumers" are able to identify these products because each carries a label that signifies that it has been certified to meet a particular set of standards. This act of buying food that is labeled as ethically sourced is sometimes called "voting with your dollar."¹

From Fair Trade to Shade-Grown and from Organic to Rainforest Alliance certified products, food labeling and certification have become increasingly prevalent in the United States and other wealthy countries in recent decades. As the market for private food certification schemes has grown, it has shifted from the small niche market of idealists into the consciousness of mainstream consumers, becoming a source of controversy for pundits, academics, activists, and shoppers. Neither the proponents nor the critics of food labeling lack passion or conviction. It is understood, respectively, as a useful attempt to raise the standards of food production in the absence of strong state regulation, or as a marketing ploy by which firms capitalize on consumer demand for ethical products by "greenwashing" or "fairwashing" their public images. This chapter

outlines these debates by highlighting some of the central claims made by proponents of food labeling as well as some key critiques, focusing particularly on Fair Trade and Organic certification standards; it also reviews existing research to evaluate positions in these debates.² The central question is: does food certification work?

Scholarly work on food certification and labeling is part of a broader literature on political consumerism, which understands the act of purchasing certain goods as a political act, in parallel to more conventional forms of political participation. Different strands of the literature, however, conceptualize political consumption variously as a substitute for and as a complement to more traditional forms of political involvement. On the one hand, politicized consumption may be seen as yet another form of political participation for people who already use formal public channels to express their political preferences.³ On the other hand, market-based political action may be used as an alternative to formal public channels of political participation, particularly for marginalized or underrepresented groups. Scholars who emphasize both of these perspectives agree that the consumption of certain goods should be seen as a form of political action.

Despite the proliferation of certification programs in recent decades, the phenomenon of politicized consumption is not new. The history of ethical consumerism has roots in boycott strategies. In the 1790s, the British antislavery movement introduced a boycott against sugar produced by West Indian slaves, establishing the consumer boycott as what Tarrow calls a repertoire of contention (Sussman 1994, Tarrow 1994). Later social movements such as the civil rights movement and labor movements in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa followed suit, using consumer boycotts to sanction companies that violated the movements' principles. Although much of this early consumer activism was in the form of punitive or negative boycotts, examples of what Boström and Klintman call "positive political consumerism" date back to the early nineteenth century. To protest the use of slave labor in producing consumer goods, the American "free produce" movement began opening retail stores in the 1830s that sold goods made with free labor (Faulkner 2007). Half a century later, in 1898, a labeling scheme called the White Label Campaign was organized by the National Consumers' League to distinguish products made in American factories that ensured improved working conditions (Boström and Klintman 2006). This approach—rewarding companies that engage in "good" practices as opposed to punishing companies that engage in "bad" practices—is mirrored in today's ethical labeling initiatives.

Today's certification and labeling schemes are aimed at remedying a litany of pressing problems in both the developed and the developing world, particularly in the areas of labor conditions, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, and health.

Labor conditions for farmers in developing countries are at the forefront of the concerns behind labels like Fair Trade, union-made, and GoodWeave. Small farmers are among the most economically vulnerable populations in the developing world. Half of the world's undernourished people, three-quarters of Africa's malnourished children, and the majority of people living in absolute poverty work on small farms (International Food Policy Research Institute IFPRI 2005). Child labor, though almost completely eradicated in the developed world, is still a reality in low-income countries. The most

recent International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates indicate that 215 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 are working in some form of child labor. Of those children, 53 percent are engaged in work defined as hazardous, or “likely to harm [their] health, safety, and morals” (ILO 2011). The ILO lists agricultural work among the most hazardous sectors of employment, since farm workers are especially subject to toxin exposure, strenuous physical labor, and the use of dangerous equipment (see <http://www.ilo.org/safework/areasofwork/hazardous-work/lang-en/index.htm>). Labor-related certification schemes promise to remedy these conditions for their farmers.

In addition to labor issues, environmental problems take center stage in several food certification schemes. Concerns about the presence of pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers in farm runoff and their possible effects on local ecosystems motivate the ban of these chemicals in Organic standards (Trewavas 2001). Standards like Rainforest Alliance, Bird Friendly, and Demeter Biodynamic certification aim to curb agricultural practices resulting in deforestation, high levels of carbon emissions, the destruction of wildlife habitat, and reduced biodiversity (see <http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/about> or <http://nationalzoo/scbi/migratorybirds/coffee/lover.cfm> or <http://demeter-usa.org/>).

Animal welfare concerns drive demand for some types of ethically labeled food. Animals raised in confinement are often kept in crowded conditions, unable to move or express natural behaviors (Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production 2008). These practices also have implications for animal health, since high-density confinement can increase disease among livestock (Tilman et al. 2002). Physical alteration of animals is common in these conditions, including the removal of horns from cattle and beaks from poultry, typically without painkillers; 80 percent of eggs produced in the United States are produced under guidelines that recommend debeaking of poultry, a practice known to cause both short-term and chronic pain (Rodriguez 2011, Mench, Sumner, and Rosen-Molina 2011). The increasing publicity around these issues since the 1964 publication of Ruth Harrison’s book, *Animal Machines*, has brought the issue of animal welfare to the attention of consumers (Mench et al. 2011). In a national telephone survey conducted in the United States, 49 percent of consumers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I consider the well-being of farm animals when I make decisions about purchasing meat” (Lusk, Norwood, and Prickett 2007, p. 15). Labels like Certified Humane Raised and Handled, Free-Range poultry, Grass-Fed beef, Global Animal Partnership, and Animal Welfare Approved aim to address these concerns by guaranteeing conditions like outdoor access, freedom from close confinement, and protections from physical alteration without painkillers.

Finally, health concerns motivate the use of labels like Food Alliance and Organic certification. High levels of exposure to pesticides that are used in food production are known to cause birth defects, nerve damage, and cancer, and to pose particular health risks to children (EPA 2012). Increasingly, conventional agricultural land is being fertilized with biosolids or wastewater “sludge.” Though biosolid-based fertilizers are known to contain pharmaceuticals, steroids, flame-retardants, heavy metals, hormones, and human pathogens, the health effects of using them to grow food are hotly debated

(Ferguson 2009). Hormones and antibiotics used in raising conventional food animals give rise to concerns about health hazards and the development of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria (Stephany 2001, Phillips et al. 2004). Although the government limits the amount of many of these additives in all U.S. food production, consumers can select from several certification standards to help them identify food that will further reduce their exposure. Although the American Medical Association, the National Academy of Sciences, and the World Health Organization have found no scientific basis for claims that genetically modified organisms (GMOs) pose risks to human health, scientists are only just beginning to document the longer-term effects of GMOs in laboratory feeding studies. Skeptical consumers concerned about as-yet unknown effects of the technology can avoid purchasing food bearing government-mandated GMO labels in the EU, and such labeling initiatives are under consideration in the United States (Domingo and Bordonaba 2011, Carter et al. 2012).

Often these certification initiatives operate at the intersection of the private sector, the civil society sector, and the state. To lend clarity, food standards programs can be usefully divided into categories along two cross-cutting dimensions (see Figure 25.1). The first dimension divides programs into voluntary standards (which firms may choose to opt into or out of) and government-mandated standards (to which firms are required by law to adhere). The second dimension divides standards into those set and enforced by the state and those set and enforced by non-state actors (including NGOs and the private sector).

Whether a standard is voluntary or mandatory reflects more than just the institutional arrangement for its enforcement. It provides a clue about where the issue in question falls along the contested dividing line between public and private in our collective political imagination. What is the appropriate role of the state in regulating private consumption decisions? When should the government intervene in the market? The answer has been, *it depends on the issue at stake*. We generally agree that states should govern on issues related to safety, and that states should not govern on issues purely related to personal conscience; we tend to disagree, however, about how particular issues fall

		Legal status of regulation	
		Voluntary	Legally mandated
Standard setter	State	e.g. Organic	e.g. Food safety laws
	Non-State	e.g. Fair trade	

FIGURE 25.1 Food labeling schemes can be mandatory or voluntary in nature, and they can be monitored by state or non-state actors.

along that divide. The debates about regulation of GMO labeling capture this tension. Disputes about the science of GMOs' health impact has been central to the political battle over whether labeling should be mandatory in California, highlighting how the framing of these issues in terms of safety or personal preference is critical in determining whether regulation is state-mandated (Carter et al. 2012).

Moreover, all but the staunchest libertarians tend to agree that there are ethical issues beyond those of safety, often in the areas of social or environmental protection, that carry sufficient collective societal value to warrant state regulation. However, we disagree about *which* issues have that kind of societal value. The United States has universal laws prohibiting child labor, but this was not always the case. The idea that society has an interest in protecting *all* children from work hazards and freeing them to go to school, and that that interest is strong enough to warrant state interference in the market, is an idea that once lacked consensus in the U.S., and similar debates rage today on issues like environmental degradation, financial regulation, and wage standards. Given that players on all sides of these debates are invested in their preferred outcome, the framing of these issues is, to a large extent, the result of a political struggle between actors attempting to define the issues at stake in the language of safety, personal preference, and collective good.⁴

Although an extensive literature on state regulation addresses mandatory standards, this chapter summarizes a younger literature that focuses on voluntary standards. To illustrate the complexity of these voluntary initiatives, the chapter highlights one example of a voluntary certification standard run by private actors (the Fair Trade label) and one example of a voluntary certification standard run by the state (the Organic label). These programs, which rely on politicized consumption in the *private* sector to fuel regulation of the food production process, nevertheless have important implications for the *public* governance of labor markets, the environment, and human health. Private certification standards tend to arise when movements and—critically—markets demand production standards above and beyond the legal standards imposed by governments. Whether these private certification schemes complement government regulation or act as substitutes for the state is a question worth reflection, to which I will return at the end of this chapter.

Some proponents have lauded the voluntary nature of these certification schemes. Citizens and interest groups hold diverse views about how stringently labor and environmental practices should be regulated. Laws and regulatory policies passed by governments reflect a compromise among these views, which inevitably leaves some citizens' demand for higher standards unmet. One advantage of voluntary regulation is that those citizens who support stricter standards can choose to contribute resources toward that outcome, while those who prefer more lenient regulation are not coerced into doing so.⁵ The same logic holds if these initiatives are understood as "self-taxing schemes" for conscientious consumers (Arnold, Plastina, and Ball 2006). These schemes can be seen as a private, voluntary parallel to public taxation, whether they take the form of voluntary redistribution of income from consumers in rich countries to poor farmers, or the form of funding for public goods like environmental preservation. In either

case, the logic of self-taxation is that it allows each to contribute according to her preferences, accommodating pluralism of views toward redistribution better than a government policy that forces a single standard of contribution.

Other observers of voluntary schemes argue that, given the leniency of government policy, certification schemes can be useful alternatives to strict legal regulation (e.g., Henson and Murphy 2010). These commentators point to deficiencies in government regulation of environmental and health standards for agriculture, suggesting that powerful special interests—such as farm lobbies—influence government policy and prevent the state from setting appropriately protective legal standards. Even when relatively stringent labor laws exist formally “on the books,” corruption, inefficient bureaucracies, and political calculations often limit government willingness and capacity to enforce them. Thus, supporters of certification standards claim that creating better channels of transparency and routing consumer dollars toward otherwise under-resourced, under-enforced safeguards will allow consumers to leverage the power of the market against poverty, environmental degradation, and health hazards when government resources or willingness falls short.

As voluntary standards have developed, they have expanded, commercialized, and become institutionalized, bringing in an increasingly diverse set of actors that span the private sector, civil society organizations, and the state. The Fair Trade industry was once the fair trade movement. It began in the civil society sector, led by churches, disaster-relief organizations, and solidarity groups that formed network-based trade channels with marginalized producers. Fair Trade began to enter mainstream markets in the late 1980s, and as the industry scaled, more commercial actors took the lead (Bacon 2005). The Organic industry was likewise once a network of social movements that coalesced into a transnational movement in the 1970s, laying the groundwork for commercially oriented actors to enter the market (see Larsson, this volume). Subsequently, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) took on the role of standardizing and overseeing organic certification standards.

Along with the growth and commercialization of these certification systems, tension has arisen over the question of how stringent these standards should be. There is a perceived trade-off between the strictness and scalability of standards, and stakeholders disagree about how to approach this choice (Gendron, Bisailon, and Rance 2009, Auld 2011). On one side of the debate is a group we might call the “depth” advocates, who argue that lowering standards erodes the meaning and impact of the standard. On the other side of the debate is a group we might call the “breadth” advocates, who argue that making standards marginally less strict will make certification less daunting for significantly larger companies, thus appealing to a broader set of retailers and spreading standards further throughout the market.

The difference between these perspectives fundamentally boils down to how these advocates evaluate impact. Is the impact on environmental practices, labor conditions, and human health greater if a small number of companies follow very strict guidelines, or if many large companies make minor adjustments in their practices? This question remains at the center of debates on every labeling scheme visible enough

to have gained a foothold in public discourse.⁶ People in the food-labeling industry disagree vehemently about the best approach; one result has been the fragmentation and multiplication of standards as “depth” and “breadth” advocates go their separate ways. A microcosm of this debate can be seen in the 2011 split between Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International over the former’s decision to include plantation coffee in Fair-Trade certification standards rather than only small-holder coffee cooperatives, a move intended to make Fair-Trade coffee available to larger retailers and to reach more farmers (Fairtrade International [FLO] and Fair Trade USA 2011). The network of food labeling organizations and activists thus represent loose coalitions of actors who share basic goals but hold different views on how best to achieve them. Moreover, these ideologies are allied—often uncomfortably—with actors driven by profit motives rather than social or environmental goals. The result is a complex, multifold family of overlapping certification systems, characterized by both common ground and internal tensions.

Considerable debate exists concerning the question: *Do these food certification schemes do what they promise to do?* This question hinges on three critical issues, which will be considered in depth. First, is there enough consumer demand for ethically labeled products to fuel a market large enough to make a measurable impact? Second, assuming sufficient demand, do these ethical standards actually create intended positive outcomes for the producer, the consumer, or the farm—whether in the form of better labor conditions, increased protection of the environment, or the reduction of risks to human health? Third, do the certification agents credibly act as safeguards to the system?

This chapter will examine each of these questions in turn. Section II outlines the debates about the nature of consumer demand for ethically labeled food. Section III investigates the effects of labeling schemes for producers and the production process. Section IV interrogates the efficacy of certification agents (or “watchdogs”). Section V turns to implications of voluntary, market-based regulation schemes for state-mandated labor and environmental standards. Section VI concludes. This analysis suggests there is reason for cautious optimism that ethical labeling initiatives for food live up to their promises, albeit inconsistently and on a relatively small scale. Critically, however, the scope of their impact is constrained by limited consumer demand, label proliferation and fatigue, and structural barriers to transparency and accountability.

THE CONSUMER

Theory

The ethical consumer represents the vital engine that drives demand for certified and labeled food. Without a critical mass of buyers willing to spend money on products that support social and environmental causes, the system falls apart.

Because almost all products that Americans purchase are produced far from the point of sale, until recently it has been impossible for consumers to observe the conditions under which their food is produced, and, therefore, difficult to act on their desires for value-consistent consumption. This lack of transparency has created an asymmetry of information between consumers and producers. Certification and labeling offer a solution to this form of market imperfection, providing information that allows consumers to distinguish among products and support a style of food production that reflects their values (Elliott and Freeman 2003, Brown 2006).

By establishing a channel of information connecting the consumer with the production process, labeled food also provides a sense of connectedness between consumers, their food, and the people and place from which it came (Dolan 2011). As Luetchford notes, “in ethical consumption the aim is to break down and demystify the distance between parties in the exchange and accentuate the relation between them.” (Luetchford 2008, p. 3).

Finally, certification and labeling allow companies to “ethics-discriminate” (in a similar sense to premium-price discrimination) among customers to better tailor their offerings to more nuanced patterns of demand. While most shoppers prioritize price and quality over labor and environmental standards, some consumers care enough about the conditions under which their food is produced that they are willing to pay more. Certification and labeling allow firms to reduce deadweight loss by catering directly to that otherwise untapped demand. Thus, Kellogg has developed the Kashi brand, which uses certified organic and GMO-free ingredients in some of its cereals; PepsiCo has acquired Naked Juice, whose beverages are made with bananas certified by Rainforest Alliance; and Kraft has launched a line of certified Organic macaroni and cheese alongside its conventional product offerings (Strom 2012, <http://www.nakedjuice.com/ourpurpose/> and <http://www.kashi.com/ourcommitment>). Food labeling allows companies to target consumers willing to pay for particular production standards. In theory, this is good for the farmer, the consumer, and the firm.

Different theories exist about what motivates consumers to buy ethically labeled food.⁷ Understanding consumer motivations matters because the nature of those motivations determines how widespread and robust demand will be for ethically certified products, ultimately constraining the size and impact of the market.

One explanation for the decision to purchase ethically labeled food is that of altruism. An altruistic consumer would buy organic, fair trade food because she gleans personal satisfaction from the advancement of a cause she cares about (“pure altruism”) or because the act of contributing to a cause makes her feel good about herself (“impure” or “warm glow altruism”) (Andreoni 1989).

An alternative explanation is that consumers purchase ethically labeled food because their judgment is influenced by social norms. Norm-responsive consumers perceive that buying fair trade or organic food is the “appropriate” thing to do, since others in their reference group are doing it, too. Adherence to norms tends to be strongest when there are personal and contextual similarities between an individual and the group that embraces the given norm (Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008). If a shopper is

surrounded by other shoppers of a similar demographic and subculture who are buying ethically certified food, her own assessment of the value of that food (and the cause it supports) might be influenced positively and she may make the same choice out of adherence to a group norm.

A third (and related) explanation for ethical consumption is that consumers use labeled products for social signaling and status. What you buy can be understood as a signal for who you are and what social group you belong to (Bourdieu 1984). Purchasing certified food may be associated with highly valued qualities among some social groups. If someone living in Berkeley, Park Slope, or Cambridge wants to be seen by their peers as compassionate, selfless, or invested in environmental preservation, buying ethically labeled food may be a way of achieving social status, providing purchasing choices are observable (Holländer 1990). Ethical consumption, in this model, becomes a form of “conspicuous consumption.”⁸

Finally, consumers may take certification labels as an indicator of the product’s quality, whether in the form of taste or healthfulness. In a nationwide telephone survey, a 78 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Animals raised under higher standards of care will produce safer and better tasting meat” (Lusk, Norwood, and Prickett 2007, p. 21). In an online survey conducted by Nielson in 2010, 76 percent of respondents reported that they purchase organic food because they believe it is healthier (<http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/consumer/global-trends-in-healthy-eating/>).

Since many purveyors of labeled food highlight the health and quality benefits of their products alongside the social, environmental and animal welfare benefits, it can be difficult in practice to categorize the consumption of a given labeled product neatly into Johnston and MacKendrick’s typology of “political” consumption (motivated by collective goals) and “apolitical” consumption (motivated by individual goals) (see Johnson and MacKendrick, this volume).

Do these different sources of demand add up to a large, robust market for ethically labeled food? Proponents of ethically labeled foods suggest that certified products tap into widespread, latent consumer demand for food produced under good conditions, and that this demand is broad-based and robust enough to drive real change in labor conditions, the environment, and human health outcomes.

Critiques

Critics of labeling schemes present a more pessimistic view, raising several concerns about the nature of consumer demand for ethical food.

One common concern is that consumer demand is not sufficiently widespread to make a significant difference in outcomes like labor conditions or environmental degradation (e.g., Van der Zee 2007). Even if a handful of consumers are willing to pay a premium, critics argue that there are too few consumers of this kind to make these initiatives scalable and effective at a global level. The current size of the market reflects not only demand, but also the current level of supply for ethical goods. It is difficult to know

which is the binding constraint, and, thus, to know exactly the extent of latent consumer demand for ethical goods, making it hard to settle this debate.

Another concern is that demand for ethically certified food is likely to be significantly constrained by income, limiting the scale of the market for labeled food. That is, lower-income consumers face budget constraints that may limit their ability to spend extra money on products that make ethical promises (Howard and Allen 2010). A related objection is that these initiatives are fundamentally classist in nature, excluding low-income consumers from this model of ethical action. Finally, the concern about income constraints on demand raises an additional alarm, which is that fluctuations in the economy will be reflected in fickleness of demand for labeled food; accordingly, in an economic downturn, sales of Fair-Trade and Organic groceries would fizzle (Cohen 2012, Hickman 2010).

A third concern centers on label proliferation and fatigue (Schuetze 2012, Harbaugh, Maxwell, and Roussillon 2011). Because there is no single governmental or nongovernmental body that oversees labeling standards, new certification standards are born every year, each designed by different agents and addressing a wide assortment of concerns. The number and variety of certification standard have grown in recent decades to the point that consumers may find it overwhelming and frustrating to sort through the various claims. In 2006, there were as many as 137 labels being marketed to socially conscious consumers that made claims ranging from “salmon-safe” to “ozone-friendly” (Alsever 2006). At the time this volume went to press, Ecolabel Index listed 432 ecolabels—ranging from “salmon-safe” to “bird-friendly”—across 246 countries and 25 industries” (www.ecolabelindex.com). Consumers, like voters, have limited time to investigate claims made by different labels, and this combined with the burgeoning of certification standards may have two consequences that limit the effectiveness of labeling schemes.

First, consumers may not be able to tell the difference between the claims made by different labels, creating an incentive for “greenwashing” or “fairwashing.” The average consumer may glean basic information about a product from its label (“this is good for the environment”), but details about what is being guaranteed are often lost. Consumers may thus be unable to differentiate between rigorous and lax standards, and that disadvantages producers who subscribe to expensive, rigorous standards. The ill-informed nature of consumer demand for ethically labeled food may incentivize firms to adopt certification standards with few requirements, potentially creating a race-to-the-bottom dynamic.

Second, consumers may get fed up by the number of different labels and their lack of transparency, and disengage from ethical consumption entirely. Even the most conscientious, committed shopper could spend hours poring over the websites of standards providers without understanding the differences among similar-sounding certification rules. Well-meaning consumers may also discover that a favorite label carries fewer guarantees than its brand image would suggest; indeed, such an incident made the national news when consumers discovered that Kashi’s “natural” cereals contained genetically modified ingredients (<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/industries/>

food/story/2012-04-29/kashi-natural-claims/54616576/1). Under such conditions, critics worry that consumers will increasingly view food labels with suspicion and fatigue.

Together, these caveats raise doubts about whether consumers will wade through the plethora of standards they encounter in grocery stores and commit sufficient resources to ethical consumption to make a difference.

Research

To weigh in on these debates, it is helpful to turn to existing empirical research on the nature and extent of demand for ethically certified food. Research to date does little to disentangle the particular motivations of ethical shoppers, but it does support the existence of committed ethical consumers, though this group may be limited in size along demographic and income lines. The majority of the research has been survey based, but several recent experimental studies add richness to the literature.

Several surveys show that consumers report themselves to be willing to pay extra for products made under ethical conditions. In a survey of 808 respondents in Belgium, consumers reported that they would be willing to pay an average of 10 percent extra for Fair-Trade coffee. Those willing to pay the highest premium were more idealistic than others, less socially conventional, and tended to be aged between 31 and 44. Those who were willing to pay a somewhat lower premium were more idealistic than average but otherwise not significantly different from the average consumer in socio-demographic terms (De Pelsmacker et al. 2005). A U.S. survey conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that roughly 80 percent of individuals claimed to be willing to pay a premium for an item if they were assured it was made under good working conditions (Elliott and Freeman 2003).

In another survey, a significant majority of respondents felt that if Americans are using products made by foreign workers, “this creates a moral imperative to ensure that they are not required to work in harsh or unsafe conditions.” 76% of respondents from the same survey, 76 percent claimed they would be willing to pay \$25 instead of \$20 for a product if “an international organization . . . would check the conditions in a factory and, if acceptable, give them the right to label their products as not made in a sweatshop” (PIPA 2000, pp. 36–37). Blend and Ravensway conducted a household survey to gather data on intentions to purchase eco-labeled apples under varying conditions. Respondents reported that they would be willing to pay more for eco-labeled apples, though willingness declined as price premium increased (Blend and Ravensway 1999). Loureiro and Lotade conducted a willingness-to-pay survey of grocery shoppers, finding that they reported themselves as willing to pay a premium for Fair Trade, shade-grown, and Organic coffee (Loureiro and Lotade 2005). This growing body of evidence supports the idea that consumers express a willingness to pay extra for ethically labeled products.

The most critical drawback to self-reported survey data on people’s willingness to buy ethically certified products is that it is subject to social desirability bias, or systematic

error in data from self-reports because of a respondent's wish to project a favorable image (Fisher 1993, p. 303). Some surveys attempt to mitigate the effects of social desirability bias by using anonymous, mail-in surveys (e.g., De Pelsmacker et al. 2005). However, because social desirability bias comprises a self-deceptive aspect in addition to an other-deceptive aspect (Nederhoff 1985), there is reason to suspect that all self-reported data will overestimate consumer willingness to pay a premium on ethically certified food.

A small but growing number of empirical studies avoid problems of social desirability bias by measuring actual consumer purchasing behavior in response to the presence or absence of ethical labels on products in retail settings. The best of these studies are experimental, since their research design avoids the selection bias that often plagues observational studies. In a study of 150,000 eBay auctions that resemble "natural experiments," Elfenbein et al. found that auction participants were willing to pay 6 percent more for an identical product when it was advertised that the auction was for charity (Elfenbein et al. 2010). In a two-part field experiment of 26 stores of a major U.S. grocery chain, sales of coffee rose by 10 percent when a Fair Trade label was added, as consumers switched from unlabeled coffee (sales for unlabeled coffee dropped 9 percent when the labeled option appeared). This suggests that when consumers have a choice between labeled and unlabeled coffees that are otherwise identical and equally priced, consumers respond to the label. In the second part of the experiment, the addition of a price premium to two Fair-Trade-labeled coffees led to a 2 percent increase in sales in the case of the higher-end coffee and a 30 percent decrease in sales in the lower-end coffee, suggesting that some consumers are willing to pay a premium on Fair Trade labeled coffee, but that this willingness may be limited to higher-income shoppers (Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Sequeira 2011).⁹

Similar experiments on nonfood items support the idea that some types of consumers are willing to spend extra on ethically labeled products. In an experiment in a home goods store, sales of towels and candles rose by 10–20 percent when labels promising good labor standards were added (Hiscox and Smyth 2007). In an eBay experiment, consumers were willing to pay on average a 45 percent premium for Fair-Trade-labeled shirts over unlabeled shirts (Hainmueller et al. 2011). In an experiment in 111 Banana Republic factory outlet stores, the addition of labels conveying a fair-labor message increased sales of a high-priced women's clothing item by 14 percent, whereas labels had no significant effect on the sales of low-priced women's or men's¹⁰ items (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2012a). In another experiment in 419 Banana Republic stores and 155 Gap Outlet stores, women proved willing to buy eco-labeled denim jeans sold in nonoutlet stores (sales increased by 8 percent in the presence of a label with an environmental message), but the labels had no effect on sales of men's jeans sold in nonoutlet stores or of women's jeans sold in outlet stores (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2012b).

While experimental studies offer the most rigorous tests of consumer demand for certified products to date, they, too, have limitations. The most important caveat concerns issues of generalizability. Demand for ethically certified products may be product specific. Additionally, none of the studies—even those conduct in outlet stores—effectively targeted low-income shoppers.

Existing evidence thus suggests that, while there is demand for ethically labeled products and this demand seems robust to modest price increases, it may be limited in scope to certain products, income groups, and demographics. In particular, these studies suggest that women and high-end shoppers may be the most willing to spend extra money to purchase products with ethical labels. The theoretical logic behind the observed income disparity seems fairly straightforward. The gender discrepancy is consistent with the general finding in the literature that women engage in politicized consumerism more frequently than men do. Scholars point out that this trend has historical roots: women tended to play a prominent role in early instances of political consumerism, including boycotts and food price strikes (Micheletti 2004). It is also consistent with the broader finding in the literature that women tend to act more altruistically than men in situations involving charitable giving or public goods investment (List 2004, Andreoni and Vesterlund 2001).

Finally, although price levels clearly impact consumer demand, there is also research that supports the idea that quality considerations are significant to the supply of ethically labeled food. In a small survey of natural foods stores, grocery stores, and cafes, Levi and Linton found that retailers offered Fair Trade certified products only if they perceived customer demand for it, but that customer requests for fair trade options were insufficient unless the retailer also perceived the product to be of high quality (Levi and Linton 2003). This research is consistent with the idea that an ethical claim, valued by the customer as it may be, is not enough to scale the market for labeled food; rather, ethical certification must be paired with quality.

THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

Theory

No amount of consumer demand will make a difference unless ethical labeling initiatives create positive results on the ground for farmers and farms. At the other end of the supply chain from the ethical consumer is the production process being certified. Labeled food makes specific promises about how the purchase of that food will affect the people or place where it is produced. A key empirical question is whether and to what extent those promises are kept.

The promises are different in the case of each certification standard. With regard to the two labeling schemes considered in detail here, the Organic label promises that the food it certifies is not produced with any chemicals on the organics-prohibited list produced by the USDA. Additionally, proponents claim that organic food comes with health benefits and environmental payoffs for the farm and its surrounding ecosystem.

The Fair Trade label promises that workers are guaranteed a price minimum and are paid a social premium to be invested in local social programs, that food is grown in safe and healthy working conditions with no child labor, and that sustainable environmental practices are used. Each of the hundreds of existing food labels makes unique promises of this kind.

Critiques

Not all observers are convinced that ethical labeling initiatives are living up to their promises in terms of the impact they claim to have on the producers and the production process. Although many critiques of the purported impact of certification on farmers, farms, and food are specific to individual labeling initiatives, some critiques span all standards, particularly those that raise doubts about transparency and accountability, the use of price premiums, the tension between ethical and market imperatives, and the way in which standards might reinforce North-South power relations.

Perhaps the most common generalized doubt reflects skepticism about the extent to which labeling organizations are able to overcome logistical and structural barriers to ensuring transparency and consistent monitoring, and, therefore, to guarantee adherence to standards. Most food supply chains are not vertically integrated, but rather are characterized by aggregation and mixing of products, making an individual product difficult to trace from production to point-of-sale, particularly when supply chains span international borders. Given that most farms located in developing countries are only reachable by roads of dubious quality, arranging unannounced monitoring visits is costly and difficult. Many monitoring standards require only an annual visit, which is often known of in advance. As critics point out, this arrangement is insufficient to guard against violations throughout the rest of the year.

There is also debate about whether retailers capture too large a portion of the premium charged to consumers. Some point out that when retailers mark up ethically labeled food products, they may keep a large percentage of that margin for themselves, and the consumers are none the wiser (Downie 2007, Griffiths 2012). In one case, a retailer was criticized when it was found that 90 percent of the premium charged for a cup of Fair Trade coffee went to the retailer, whereas only 10 percent was passed along to farmers (Harford 2006). Rodrik voices skepticism about whether Fair-Trade farmers whose coffee is sold through Starbucks are seeing any improvement in their livelihoods or whether Starbucks is keeping the entire premium, using sympathetic consumers to make a profit (Rodrik 2007). Alsever criticized TransFair USA for using most of their revenue—\$1.7 million of the \$1.89 million they generated in licensing fees annually—on salaries, travel, conferences, and publications (Alsever 2006). The counter to such critiques, however, is that some portion of the premium must go to the retailer and the watchdog to cover costs associated with investing in a certified supply chain. Nevertheless, critics claim that certification organizations take too large a cut.

In the case of all standards, there tends to be a tension between the imperatives of the market and the social goals at the label's foundations (Luetchford 2011, Kennedy 2004). For example, for Fair Trade coffee traders to maintain high sales, the coffee must be of good quality. However, the poorest farmers tend not to produce the highest quality coffee. Indeed, the production of high quality food requires investments in better techniques, equipment, and inputs on the production end that is beyond the reach of many of the poor farmers who the label seeks to assist. The Fair Trade movement's core value of poverty eradication thus must be reconciled with the conflicting demands of

the market, and this frequently means compromises, particularly as labels expand. Hardliners, or “depth” advocates, who seek higher standards lament the erosion of values from the early days of the movement, whereas commercially oriented or “breadth” advocates (who want standards to be more easily attainable and, therefore, widespread) are frustrated by what they perceive as the stubborn backwardness of the old guard purists.

For labeled food that is produced outside wealthy countries, another critique is that the rules are made in the United States and Western Europe and then implemented in developing countries, reflecting and reinforcing a power imbalance between the North and South in these certified supply chains. Vogel articulates what he sees as the danger of this approach: “To the extent that voluntary labor codes replace rather than complement state regulations, developing country governments are essentially ceding their sovereignty to the demands of western activists, who are the primary drivers and the main ‘consumers’ of labor codes. Many labor codes essentially empower NGOs, rather than developing country workers, and the two’s priorities can often conflict” (Vogel 2008, p. 274). This line of argument emphasizes the inequitable nature of the historical power imbalances that have shaped the geopolitical context in which labeling schemes have emerged.

This chorus of critical voices calls into question the claims made by proponents of labeled food that systems of certification can create positive impact for farmers and the environment.

Research

Existing research is not thorough enough to assess all these claims and critiques empirically, but it can illuminate some issues surrounding the impact of food certification. As research on the impact of labeling standards tends to be standard-specific, I will focus here on empirical evidence about the effects of Organic and Fair Trade Certification.

The research on organic foods and indicators of human health is most thoroughly summarized in a meta-analysis by a team of research scientists at Stanford. The analysis (Smith-Spangler et al. 2012) reviews findings from 17 human studies and 223 studies of food, focusing on bacterial contamination, pesticide levels, human health biomarkers, and nutrition levels in organic versus conventional food, and yields mixed results.

The results suggest that, although organic food may not systematically reduce bacterial contamination, it may carry less antibiotic-resistant bacteria than conventional food. The Stanford team found no statistically significant difference in levels of pathogenic bacteria contamination overall, though a handful of studies documented differences: in one, organic food was found to carry a slightly higher risk of *E. coli* contamination; in another, organic food had 33 percent lower incidence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria; another found organic grains to carry a lower level of the fungal toxin deoxynivalenol.

Research on pesticides is somewhat more suggestive. Studies of food content found that organic produce had a 30 percent lower risk of pesticide contamination than

conventional produce. Although there have been no adult studies, two studies of children found significantly lower urinary pesticide levels in those who followed an organic diet. Beyond pesticides, however, the reviewed human studies that examine health biomarkers and nutrient levels in the adults did not find differences between subjects on conventional and organic diets that were clinically meaningful.

In terms of nutrition, food studies in the Stanford analysis examining the vitamin and nutrient content of food found very few differences between organic and conventionally grown food. A few human and food studies found higher levels of beneficial fatty acids associated with organic food.

The general findings of the Stanford meta-analysis point to the cautious conclusion that organic food is likely to offer reduced levels of pesticides and reduced levels of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The analysis suggests that there are few differences in levels of nutrition between organic and conventional food. The Stanford analysis did not include studies comparing the health of farm workers on organic and conventional farms; in a study of the health of 46 farmers in Mexico, researchers found that 20 percent of farm workers exposed to pesticides exhibited signs of acute poisoning (Payán-Rentieria et al. 2012).

The literature on the environmental impact of organic certification yields similarly mixed results, but points toward several possible benefits. One study on dairy production showed that organic dairy farms were at a lower risk for negative environmental response to fertilizers than conventional dairy farms. However, organic dairy farms also showed higher levels of methane emissions, suggesting that without also lowering emission of carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide they posed a higher risk of contributing to global warming. Moreover, organic farming reduced pesticide use but increased land use (De Boer 2003). Biao et al. find evidence that adherence to organic standards is associated with increased soil fertility, nutrient management, and biodiversity on farms (Biao et al. 2003). Nelson and Martin's (2013) mixed-methods studies of Organic-certified cocoa farms in Ecuador and tea estates in India link Organic certification with positive environmental outcomes (reforestation, conservation, and sustainable practices). However, attributing this outcome to Organic certification is difficult, both because there was some evidence that certified organizations may have been engaging in better practices prior to becoming certified and because most Organic-certified farmers studied were also Fair Trade- and/or Rainforest Alliance-certified.

Related literature on the effects of environmental labeling and certification for non-food production adds complexity to this empirical evidence. In a meta-analysis of nine Voluntary Environmental Programs (VEPs), researchers find that self-monitoring VEP participants performed *worse* with regard to emissions and waste management than nonparticipants, and third-party-monitored VEP participants performed *the same* as nonparticipants (Darnall and Sides 2008). Taken together, these results indicate that the environmental impact of organic farming is multidimensional and that it is not necessarily the case that "all good things go together."

A growing body of research investigates the impact of Fair Trade certification. While findings are mixed, they suggest possible benefits both in income and non-income

areas. Because the empirical literature in this area is not yet as well developed as that on Organic certification, there are few conclusive answers, but the existing research warrants a review.

A number of studies document individual cases or small numbers of certified producers. These studies tend to show that Fair Trade-certified farmers are doing relatively well. In an evaluation of several cooperatives of cocoa farmers in Ecuador that sell cocoa through a Fair Trade NGO, farmers reported that Fair Trade brought them benefits, particularly in the area of price, fair weighing and grading, marketing skills, organizational development, and production techniques (Nelson and Galvez 2000). In his 2008 ethnographic study of Costa Rican coffee farmers, Luetchford finds Fair Trade certification to have a positive impact—the Fair Trade cooperative he studied marginally outperformed a noncertified plant—but the research design failed to control for significant differences between the two farms that might explain these results (Luetchford 2008).

Some research suggests that the impact of Fair Trade certification on farmer income may be limited for cases in which farmers sell only a small portion of their crop to Fair Trade buyers. It is not uncommon for farmers to sell to both the conventional and the specialty market, piecing together market demand to try to make a living. Luetchford's certified coffee growers, for example, sold just 2 percent of their coffee through "alternative" trade outlets (Luetchford 2008, p. 29). A study commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) found that Fair Trade coffee producers in Tanzania and cocoa producers in Ghana sold only a fraction of their product to Fair Trade markets (and, therefore, received a Fair Trade premium for only a portion of their products) (Jones, Bayley, Robins et al. 2000). Nelson and Martin (2013) find some evidence of the same phenomenon.

In these and similar cases, benefits seem to be more significant in the nonincome area. In a two-year study by the Center for Fair and Alternative Trade Studies on the effect of Fair Trade on Mexican and Central American farmers, the transfer of technical skills, improved marketing strategies, product diversification, and social benefits like clinics and schools outstripped the benefits of increased income (Glazer 2007). In the case of the Tanzanian coffee producers and the Ghanaian cocoa growers, the most important impact of Fair Trade appears to be in the area of capacity building, rather than income improvement (Jones, Bayley, Robins et al. 2000).

However, since these studies use small sample sizes, it would be inadvisable to draw firm conclusions about the general effects of Fair Trade labeling and certification from them. Although case studies can provide invaluable insights into the lives of Fair-Trade farmers and the mechanisms by which certification may impact their livelihoods, observations drawn from one or a few cases cannot be easily generalized to a whole population.

A growing number of large-*n* quantitative studies measure the effects of certification on farmers. In a series of studies focusing on Fair Trade-certified cocoa in Ghana and Ecuador and tea in Kenya and India, Nelson and Martin (2013) conducted both large-*n* surveys and qualitative research and found mixed results. The strongest indication of economic impact from these studies was increased market access, which was

a consistent finding in all four country cases. Fair Trade certified farmers reported positive income effects in Ecuador and Kenya; often this effect seemed to result from increases in yield and/or quality. However, Fair Trade certification seems to have had no effect on income in Ghana or India. Non-economic benefits were also reported (e.g. social inclusion of women, community benefits like improved health and education, increased food security) but these benefits were not consistently present across cases. Importantly, many of the Fair Trade cooperatives that yielded these findings (those in Ecuador, Kenya, and India) were multi-certified, so Fair Trade's independent effect is uncertain in all but the Ghana results.

Other quantitative studies echo these cautiously positive results. Becchetti and Constantino's (2006) study of Kenyan farmers finds that farmers with Fair Trade certification have significantly higher price satisfaction¹¹ than non-Fair Trade certified farmers. A survey of 228 coffee farmers in Nicaragua showed that farmers participating in a certification scheme (including Fair Trade and Organic) are four times less likely than farmers selling only to conventional markets to perceive a risk of losing their land title due to low prices (Bacon 2005). In a 2006 survey of the effects of Fair Trade on 1200 coffee growers in Nicaragua, Peru, and Guatemala, findings suggest a correlation between participation in Fair Trade and improvements in life quality, health, education, material comforts, social participation, technical and social assistance, and sustainable agricultural practices (Arnould, Plastina, and Ball 2006).¹²

Even in the case of large-*n* quantitative studies, caution is warranted in drawing inferences about certification's causal impact on producers because of concerns about selection bias. Because studies on the effect of certification on producers have been mostly observational rather than experimental, there is strong reason to suspect that the population of farmers that selects into Fair Trade is not identical to the population of farmers that does not. Certification is voluntary and not costless, and farmers are unlikely to opt in if the expected costs outweigh the benefits. Since it is easier and less costly for farmers to become certified when they are already following certification standards, it is plausible that farmers who select into Fair Trade certification are already more or less following relatively good labor, financial, and environmental practices. Thus, any difference observed between certified and uncertified farmers may be picking up underlying differences in farmer type that existed prior to certification.

Indeed, in the view of one Fair Trade coffee cooperative manager, "involvement in Fair Trade is one *result* of development at the local and regional level. The modernizing process, the establishment of bureaucratic structures, the setting up of common agendas and networking have, he feels, opened up the possibility for expansion and progress and generated access to alternative trade" (Luetchford 2008, p. 28).

Another reason for caution is that researchers may not always be able to isolate the causal effects of certification from the results of other agricultural development programs. A farm or production facility that receives ethical certification often receives other kinds of benefits, interventions, or "treatments." In other words, agricultural development treatments often come in bundles. For example, a local development NGO might promote Fair Trade certification, distribute discounted organic fertilizer, train

farmers on new techniques, and offer small loans for new farm equipment. Moreover, once a cooperative is established, farmers may more easily overcome collective action problems and more successfully improve production or market access. In these cases of bundled treatments, it is difficult to disentangle the effect of the certification from the effects of being organized into a cooperative or receiving capacity-building training.¹³

The best way around these issues is experimental research. Experimental studies of the effects of certification schemes on producers are on the horizon and offer the greatest potential for conclusive evidence on whether certification schemes actually help farmers.¹⁴

THE WATCHDOG

The spread of third-party certification standards is unfolding alongside a parallel development: the spread of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives on the part of companies. Corporate Social Responsibility schemes often make claims similar to those of certification and labeling initiatives, from promoting safe and healthy working conditions to ensuring environmentally sustainable sourcing practices. They key difference is that CSR claims are made by the company selling the product, not by outside parties.¹⁵

There is a clear incentive for firms to make rosy claims about their sourcing practices without actually incurring the expenses of ameliorating hazardous working conditions, low wages, child labor, the use of toxic chemicals, high emissions, and poor treatment of animals in their production processes. Milton Friedman wrote in 1970, “I share Adam Smith’s skepticism about the benefits that can be expected from ‘those who affected to trade for the public good,’” (Friedman 1970) and the dangers of “greenwashing” and “fairwashing” are not lost on today’s ethical consumers.

The advantage articulated by third-party certifiers is that, unlike companies with CSR initiatives, they are not motivated by profit and are in the position to act as watchdogs, providing accountability by certifying and monitoring production facilities and food supply chains from which they do not draw a profit. In other words, in the principal-agent problem that necessarily arises between a consumer and a standards provider—characterized as it is by an asymmetry of information—third-party certifiers are less susceptible than corporate standards providers to moral hazard (Deaton et al. 2010). Freeman argues that “some external labeling organization, private (*vide* Consumer Reports) or public, would be needed to assure the accuracy of labour conditions labels” (Freeman 1994, p. 83). Certification systems typically involve both a standard-setting body and certification agents. Standard-setting bodies are frequently nonprofit organizations, though this role is also sometimes played by the government. Fair Trade standards are set by nonprofit organizations, whereas Organic standards are set by the USDA. These standard-setting bodies then accredit and authorize certification agents. Certification agents are nonprofits, private companies, or government

agents who visit farm sites, review production conditions, grant or deny certification for a given standard, and monitor compliance.

The central concern that critics (Griffiths 2012, Weitzman 2006) articulate about labeling organizations is that, although they lack the profit incentive that firms face, labeling organizations face incentives of their own that might undermine their objectivity, the quality of information they present to consumers, and the integrity of their standards enforcement.

One such incentive is the imperative of self-perpetuation. Organizations, once established, tend to develop a path-dependent inclination to remain in existence (Pierson 2000). For a standard-setting organization to remain in existence, it must maintain sufficient credibility in the eyes of the public so that its label is marketable to companies. This does not incentivize labeling organizations to publicize cases of system breakdown. If a certified farm is found to be violating standards, reporting violations to the public runs the risk of doing damage to the label's image if consumers view the problem to be endemic, and this could be detrimental to the labeling organization's future. Pritchett models a situation in which public-sector advocates with altruistic motives have the incentive to avoid rigorous investigation and evaluation of their pet programs in order to safeguard their budget for doing good in their chosen way (Pritchett 2002). The logic is similar here.

A related incentive is genuine concern on the part of third-party certifiers for the welfare of producers and environmental outcomes. This creates an added inducement to minimize publicity when violations are discovered, since damaged credibility could lead to decreased sales overall, ultimately hurting the social or environmental cause in question. It is easy to justify a lack of total transparency with the idea of protecting other farms from consumer backlash.

Together, these incentives run the risk of discouraging perfect transparency on the part of labeling organizations. After all, at present there is no watchdog to the watchdog (Follesdal 2004).¹⁶ And although third-party certifiers are not selling products, they *are* effectively selling a brand (Granville 2009). In that sense they are both certifying products and marketing the concept of Fair Trade or Organic certification. At the front of its 2009/10 "Impact Report," Fair Trade USA quotes a worker from one of its certified farms: "Thank you to those who buy Fair Trade. By buying this fruit, you've made it possible for the dreams of families like mine to become a reality" (Fair Trade USA 2010). This kind of inspiring personal testimonial often stands in for a more rigorous measure of impact in public materials produced by third-party certification bodies. Critics suggest that labeling organizations tend to project an image of their impact that is unrealistic in order to sell their products, and worry about the potential of moral hazard on the part of labelers, particularly as competition between labels increases (Luetchford 2011, Canavari, Cantore, and Spadoni 2010).

Little research has been done to weigh in on these questions about the transparency, incentives, and performance of certifying watchdog organizations themselves. Existing literature does suggest that although consumers claim that they perceive third-party organizations to be most trustworthy, they still exhibit measurable trust in claims made

by retailers or brands selling the products. In a survey of consumers conducted in the United States in 1990, 37 percent of respondents believed that “environmental groups” were the best source of unbiased information about the environment, whereas 8 percent believed the government was and 5 percent believed that product manufacturers were (Abt Associates 1994).

However, in Hiscox and Smyth’s towel and candle study, consumers exhibited increased demand for products with ethical claims made by the retailer, not by a third-party certifier (Hiscox and Smyth 2007). Similarly, in Blend and Ravensway’s household survey on consumer demand for eco-labeled apples, the comprehensiveness of the eco-claim and whether it was certified by the USDA or by the seller were both found to have insignificant impact on the consumer’s willingness to pay a premium (Blend and Ravensway 1999). This evidence suggests that, while consumers trust third-party watchdogs best, they may not be good at distinguishing them from other kinds of claim verifiers. By extension, the lack of attentiveness to the rigor of the standard in these studies lends support to the concern that consumers may not discriminate between labelers with strong standards and those whose standards slip, removing the incentive for watchdogs to maintain perfect standards of integrity.

Little work has been done investigating the relative advantage of different types of third-party certification agents. How are the incentives and constraints faced by non-state labeling organizations different from those faced by state agencies? The USDA’s long-run survival as an organization does not depend on the public image of organic standards since the fees from granting labels does not support their budget. Non-state third-party certifiers may be exempt from the politics constraining state agencies and may, therefore, exercise more independence in selecting standards, but conversely, government agencies may be exempt from the financial pressures to “sell” their standards that are faced by independent groups. Barring further examination of the constraints and resources available to state and non-state certification agents, and the implications of those differences for the standard-setting and enforcement process, it is difficult to settle debates over certification and watchdog effectiveness.

THE STATE

Private certification systems occupy an interesting position relative to state regulation. By setting, monitoring, and enforcing standards of production, they act in parallel to legal regulation, providing standards in areas where state regulation is relatively weak. Is this relationship complementary? Or are there reasons to be concerned about voluntary systems acting as substitutes for legal standards?

In many ways, private labeling schemes seem complementary to legal regulation, filling in where the state is absent. In developing countries where myriad challenges, from a large informal sector to a corrupt bureaucracy, prevent functional social welfare states from being implemented, Fair Trade offers farmers a price floor and, therefore, a

financial safety net. In light of the fact that the U.S. government has not banned the use of growth hormones and chemical fertilizers in conventional agriculture, Organic standards provide consumers with produce from certified farms free of these inputs, and decrease cropland, farm worker, and animal exposure to toxins. By this account, private certification of food coexists as a helpful supplement to state regulation.

Freeman's argument serves as a rejoinder: "... to the extent that consumers care about the existence of substandard conditions per se, regardless of whether they buy the goods so produced, legal enactment has an advantage" (Freeman 1994, p. 87). This points to a crucial difference between state-mandated regulation and regulation provided by market-based actors: Legal regulation at least purports to be universal to an entire set of citizens. The voluntary nature of private certification schemes means that consumers' demand for ethically produced food—and, therefore, the regulatory standards that go along with it—will reach only some producers. This should raise concerns about the equity and distribution of labor and environmental standards. Some but not all farmers will have access to financial safety nets. Only ecosystems in select areas will be protected. Consumers can buy organic food and avoid ingesting trace amounts of pesticides and hormones, but only those who can afford to pay for it.

Of course, it would be naïve to argue that the universalistic nature of government regulation translates into equitable distribution in any scenario. But in the case of legal regulation, laws and policies are supposed to apply to all citizens at least *de jure*, providing citizens with a formal entitlement to use as a basis for making demands on the state. In a market-based, voluntary version of a regulatory system, those outside the system have no recourse.

This lack of universalism in private regulatory systems does not necessarily present a fundamental difficulty as long as these systems truly work as a complement to legal regulation; in this case, they do not make things worse. But if private regulatory systems *compete with* or *crowd out* the role of universal state-mandated standards, there is cause for concern. If citizens, frustrated by the absence of functioning state regulation, become habituated to the idea of the private sector as the customary source of regulation, they may begin to shift their expectations toward private providers, introducing a risk that norms of state provision will begin to erode in the absence of citizen pressure. This could have long-term consequences for the distribution of regulation across the population.

CONCLUSION

Does ethically labeled food represent the answer to poor labor conditions for farmers, degradation of farmland ecosystems, and health risks posed by chemical agents in food? The evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests that it is part, but not all, of the answer.

Critics of these labeling schemes give us several important reasons to believe that private labeling of food does not represent a stand-alone answer. Demand for these

products is likely to be limited by social norms and by income. Disagreements about how stringent standards should be will continue to drive the proliferation of labels, increasingly challenging consumers' already limited ability to distinguish between strong and weak standards. The logistical and structural challenges to effective monitoring of private standards by certification agents are likely to persist, making violations at the farm level difficult to detect and thus rendering perfect compliance elusive.

Our review of existing evidence points to five key issues as likely to affect the trajectory of labeling and certification schemes in the future.

First, all theories of consumer motivation suggest that social norms drive demand. The size of the market for ethical goods will be constrained by the extent to which proponents of labeling initiatives can recruit consumers beyond a narrow demographic, economic, and ideological base. The more broadly norms are spread, the more they are likely to affect individual consumers' decisions to buy ethically labeled goods.

Second, while we know little about how these norms are spread, new communities are unlikely to start conversations about food ethics if certification remains limited to a narrow set of products and retailers. Thus the extent of demand may be affected by the outcome of the depth-versus-breadth debate.

Third, if breadth strategies increase consumer demand and depth strategies deepen farmer impact, the debate between the two may be counterproductive because it suggests a false choice. Rather than choosing between a system of lenient standards that are accessible to a broad range of products and a system of strict standards that will likely remain a niche market, labels like LEED certification and the GlobalGAP program have developed unified certification systems with incremental standards that range from the baseline to the aspirational. If this type of tiered system of food certification is more broadly adopted across the ethical food market, giving merit points both for certification at high levels and for improvements at any level, it would likely moderate label proliferation and accommodate a range of companies by rewarding both excellence and improvement.

Fourth, our discussion of certification watchdogs suggests a pivotal role for journalists in determining whether standards remain credible. Similar to the role of independent media in safeguarding a democratic political system in which voters have limited information, journalists are in the position to step into the role of "watchdog to the watchdogs," helping consumers wade through the marketing materials of each standard-setting organization and flagging certifiers whose transparency clouds or whose standards slip.

Finally, although geographic dispersion of certified farms, poor transportation infrastructure, and complex supply-chain structures will continue to pose a challenge to transparency in international supply chains, traceability initiatives that have been dismissed as too complicated in the past will become increasingly within reach with the continued spread of mobile telecommunications technology. The impact of certification schemes on farmers and farms and the credibility of those schemes in the eyes of the public will, in part, depend on the ability of certification organizations to leverage rapidly evolving technology to continue to improve monitoring efforts.

Even if all these conditions are present, the impact of ethical labeling schemes will remain limited by their voluntary nature. As long as we think these schemes reflect issues of personal conscience or mere preferences on the part of consumers, their lack of universalism may raise few concerns. As we have noted, however, the dividing lines between issues of health and safety, issues of collective societal good, and issues of personal preference and conscience are dynamic, contested, and political. Insofar as these schemes protect values like food safety, worker safety, environmental protection, or the provision of basic income nets, the limited and unequal reach of voluntary standards might be viewed more critically. In this context, as a complement to state regulation, the system of voluntary certification and labeling of food may temporarily fill gaps left by the absence of strong state standards. Such systems can further provide test cases for how more stringent standards might work in practice and be used as a model for state regulation in the future. If citizens begin to accept voluntary, market-based standards as long-run substitutes for universal government-mandated regulation, however, these systems run the risk of institutionalizing inequalities in the distribution of labor, and environmental and health standards in the food system.

NOTES

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1. Although this phrase has been used more broadly in the economics literature to describe any purchase as a signal of consumer preferences, Johnston and MacKendrick (this volume) apply it specifically to the consumption of ethically labeled food, using the voting analogy to emphasize what they see as the political nature of the preferences expressed by that particular act of consumption.
2. Certified food is part of a broader phenomenon of ethically sourced products of all kinds, from denim jeans produced with environmentally safe dyes to Fair Trade basketballs and low-emissions chemicals. This chapter, though it is focused on ethically certified food, will draw insights and evidence from a broad literature on ethically labeled products more generally.
3. Goul Anderson and Tobiasen (2004)'s survey results are consistent with this perspective.
4. See Herring, this volume; text reflects Herring personal communication.
5. See, for example, the debate about whether GMO labeling should be voluntary or mandatory (e.g. Carter et al. 2012).
6. See, for example, the "Safeguard Organic Standards" campaign run by the Organic Consumers Association (<http://www.organicconsumers.org/sos.cfm>).
7. For an extensive outline of the literature on consumer motivation for ethical consumption, see Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Sequeira (2011).
8. See particularly Trigg's extension of the concept of conspicuous consumption (2001), which builds on Veblen ([1899] 1994) and Bourdieu (1984).
9. The author participated as a research assistant in this field experiment.
10. Note that this experiment does not constitute a test of gendered demand for ethical labeling since it does not include a high-priced men's item.

11. Price satisfaction is a subjective, self-reported measure of farmers' satisfaction with the price they receive for their products.
12. For a more detailed review of the literature, see Nelson and Pound (2009) and Nelson and Martin (2012).
13. For example, in Becchetti and Constantino's (2006) study of Kenyan farmers, the authors were unable to isolate the effects of individual certification standards because many of the farmers studied were Fair Trade certified, Organic certified, and members of a cooperative marketing organization.
14. New research is beginning to move in this direction (Nelson and Martin 2012; Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Tampe 2011).
15. Some firms use outside auditors to check compliance with their CSR policies in their sourcing sites. Timberland, for example, hired Verité, a nonprofit labor rights organization, to audit the facilities from which they buy their products.
16. ISEAL is beginning to play a role in attempting to define standards for what makes a certification system credible (see <http://www.isealliance.org/>).

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