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► **To cite this version:**

Allison Marie Loonto, Nadine Arnold. Governing value(s) and organizing through standards. *International Sociology*, 2022, 37 (6), pp.601-611. 10.1177/02685809221133055 . hal-03890890

HAL Id: hal-03890890

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-03890890>

Submitted on 8 Dec 2022

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Governing Value(s) and Organizing through Standards

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Abstract

Standards are strongly intertwined with values in economic contexts, which goes far beyond economic value. Standards' diversity is expressed in local spaces where standards are made, put into action, circulate and commensurate. In these mutually linked and globally distributed spaces, we can analyze the ways in which standards and value(s) encounter each other and what consequences this brings for individuals, organizations, communities, and societies. Examining different settings of food production and organization brings new insights into the sociological explanations and understandings of how standards are guided by values and create value(s). These insights highlight new tensions between global and local social dynamics and offer two ways forward for the sociology of standards. First, is the importance of intermediation between the values of the standards and the governance effects of these same standards. Second, is the relevance of valuelessness, where the prioritization of some values devalues others or loses them completely.

Keywords

Governance, metrics, organization, standards, valuation

First published online November 4, 2022

Citation:

Loconto, A. M., & Arnold, N. (2022). Governing value(s) and organizing through standards. *International Sociology*, 37(6), 601–611.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809221133055>

Introduction

While standards have been acknowledged as a fundamental form of organizing (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000), their interrelation with value(s) is empirically underexamined and undertheorized. The relationship between standards and values needs our attention, because we know that standards infuse value chains with value-laden qualities (Ponte & Gibbon, 2005), shape businesses and markets globally (Djelic & Quack, 2018) and are part of today's moral economy (Busch, 2000). Standards are thus strongly intertwined with values in economic contexts (e.g., production, trade, sales, consumption) - and this goes far beyond economic value (Beckert & Aspers, 2011).

In situations where nature is the basis of economic activity, like agriculture and food systems, standards have a long history of use (Busch, 2011). Here, due to ecological crises (e.g., pollution, loss of species, climate change), standards are mobilized to account for abstract values, such as biodiversity, health, or carbon-neutrality. At the same time, standards can refer to values that seem more social, such as equality or fairness, since labor conditions in the production and processing of resources can be problematic. All these various values often culminate under the guiding principle of sustainable development (United Nations, 2021). Sustainability thus brings together many, possibly competing values (Constance et al., 2018; Ratner, 2004), that are interpreted and practiced differently depending on the actors involved (Adloff & Neckel, 2019). We can thus assume a locally contingent "patterning of values" (Rokeach, 2008). We see this patterning of values in the articles that are published as part of this special issue, as a group, the articles address the following questions: What value(s) do standards make visible and which are made invisible? Conversely, how do values shape the development, implementation, and diffusion of particular standards? How are value(s) mobilized as an organizing principle of production, agriculture, extraction, or conservation?

The purpose of this introduction is to situate a set of articles that help to better understand the role that standards play in these value-oriented processes – and with what societal consequences – by examining different settings of food production and organization around the world.

Standard Value(s)

Value(s) is a topic in sociology that is reemerging since Parsons' (1968 [1937]) superficial demarcation that value was the concern of economics, while values were the domain of sociology (Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992; also known as Parson's Pact, see Stark, 2009). Economic sociology has reclaimed the notion of value over the past 15 years with the emergence of valuation studies (Doganova et al., 2014). These studies bring together different strands of sociological theory such as conventions theory, actor-network theory, science and technology studies (STS) and pragmatic sociology – all of which are employed by the articles in this special issue in order to understand the values that are encoded within a range of international standards.

Values are conceptions of the desirable that are learned and guide action. Standards, on the other hand, are formalized rules and material measures (Busch, 2011) As socio-technical devices that appear to be rational and based on expertise (Ransom et al. 2017), standards are designed to diffuse worldwide (Strang & Meyer, 1993). Their voluntary nature makes it possible that state borders are no obstacle for standards, so that they regulate transnationally (Bartley, 2007; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). However, it would be naïve to believe that standards therefore lead to global homogenization and uniformity (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). Their diversity is expressed in local spaces where standards are made, put into action, circulate and commensurate (Chavinskaia & Loconto, 2020; Loconto & Demortain, 2017).

In these mutually linked and globally distributed spaces, we can analyze the ways in which standards and value(s) encounter each other and what consequences this brings for individuals, organizations, communities, and society. The articles that compose this special issue bring specific attention to what is pushed into the background, becomes invisible and is not taken into account when standards meet value(s) (Lampland & Star, 2009). As an ensemble of empirical cases and theoretical discussions, the articles that we review here offer new insights into the sociological explanations and understandings of how standards are guided by values and create value(s), which are increasingly demanded in a world characterized by crises in nature.

Standards making

In the spaces of standards making, it becomes clear that the setting of standards is a fundamentally social, messy act (Lampland & Star, 2009). This raises not only the important question of who are the rule-makers and what power do they have (Boström & Hallström, 2010; Cheyins, 2011; Renard 2003), but also which values do (not) guide the process. While some argue for actively considering values as orientations, as for example envisaged in the case of value sensitive design (Friedman & Hendry, 2019), Thévenot (2009) reminds us that standards inevitably imply evaluations at the expense of some others. That is also why, we should take seriously the recent call for increased engagement with detachment, which studies how we lose touch with some value(s) (Goulet & Vinck, 2012; Brembeck, Cochoy, & Hawkins, 2021).

Renard (2022) explores the making of standards for sustainable coffee in Mexico. She explores how Nestlé, the largest buyer of certified coffee in the world, has participated in the making of a private standard for coffee quality (the 4C standard). Here, the values that are encoded in the standard focus on a tripartite understanding of sustainability: economic, environmental and social. The logic that underpins the design of the standard is a supply chain approach, whereby the most valuable benefit from applying the standard will be supply chain security. Renard (2022) argues that the consequences of designing the standard in such a way is that the reality of practice is not in line with the values set out in the standard. Her argument is that this gap between the vision and the practice is not due to farmers not knowing how to comply with the standard, but rather there is an obligatory decoupling between

the values and the way that Nestlé manages the standard as part of its supply chain logic (see: Busch, 2007). Farmers are not actually paid fair prices for their products because despite the claims to autonomy, they are reliant upon selling only to Nestlé's intermediaries, Nestlé in turn sets the prices that create value for the company. The seedlings and suggested environmental practices end up reducing biodiversity, increasing the risk of disease and increase deforestation because of a narrow framing of environmental sustainability that allows for monocropping.

Blancaneaux (2022) studies the process of making the value of a “season” within organic standards for tomato production in France. He explores how the modern, industrial food system has devalued – symbolically and economically – the seasonal quality of food through the use of technologies and international trade among different agro-ecological zones. While local food movements have begun to promote the value of seasonality in their attempts to shorten supply chains. Blancaneaux explores these tensions within organic farming around the practice of heated greenhouse grown tomatoes, which are simultaneously local and de-seasonalized. He illustrates how different organizational forms *in* and *of* the market create spaces of diversity where the season is either valued or devalued depending on the form of organization proposed by value chain actors. Nonetheless, both relocalization processes result in differentiated standardization of the value of “seasonal” tomatoes, but in the end neither necessarily remove inequalities in global value chains.

Enacting standards

When standards are put into action, they construct value(s). Given the abstractness of standards and the fact that they can organize at a distance, their implementation requires investments from the rule-adopters. They translate the standards into local practices (Arnold & Loconto, 2021), while reorganizing their activities (Bingen & Busch, 2006; Henson & Humphrey, 2010). Thus, we can ask to what extent standards can be part of an “active society” (Etzioni, 1971) where values are realized without reifying humanity? This question is pressing because the implementation of standards is usually enforced with forms of surveillance, such as audits and certifications (Arnold, 2022; Gustafsson, 2020; Loconto & Busch, 2010), and more recently digital means of control (Herlin et al., 2021). The impact of the different forms of surveillance is often unclear, but we know, for example, that audits can erode democratic, professional values locally (Shore & Wright, 2015; Sloan & Warner, 2015).

Sánchez-García et al., (2022) and Moreno et al., (2022) both examine the application of the GlobalG.A.P. standard in different agricultural production systems in Spain. These two articles demonstrate how the GlobalG.A.P standard, which was originally developed as a stepwise approach to encourage farmers to adopt good agricultural practices, does this by prioritizing the values of modernity. In this standard, the “good” practices are those that make rational use of synthetic inputs and are focused mainly on ensuring that the food that is produced is not toxic for human consumption. In the case of the Mar Minor (small sea) near Murcia, once this standard is put into action in fresh fruit and vegetable production, the value of profitability is prioritized over a nature that is uncontrollable and unpredictable.

The consequence is first ecological collapse as the unique inland lagoon in the Mediterranean becomes home to a massive phytoplankton bloom feeding on the nitrates and phosphates that have leached from the inland intensive farming operations, and second a socio-cultural collapse as the tourism industry suffers. The nature that is valued through a bureaucratic process of managing human and non-human agents renders it abstract and detached from the territorial reality.

Moreno et al., (2022) look at the same standard in action in strawberry production near the Atlantic coast of Southern Spain. The criteria established by Global G.A.P. standard focuses almost exclusively on consumers' health while neglecting the health costs and inequalities experienced by female agricultural workers. In this way, healthiness is an emergent value of Huelva berries. However, the people who benefit from this value are not the women who are principally responsible for creating it, instead, they are valued as potential contaminating agents. In this case, we see a completely different value of "seasonal" emerge from industrial agriculture where a risk framing that values food safety for consumers prevents one class of workers from being equitably healthy.

Raynolds (2022) picks up the concern of worker welfare by examining the Fairtrade International standard in action in Ecuadorian flower plantations. The values of 'trade fairness' and 'worker empowerment' are examined, but these values are not reproduced in action. Fairtrade has only marginally reduced floral buyer power due to retailer resistance, low-bar certification competition, and programmatic regulatory gaps. In other words, producers are not seeing an increased economic value from the sale of the flowers. In terms of the empowerment of workers, most actions are focused on individual empowerment through training and strengthening of workers' committees. This individualisation of the collective value of empowerment has, nonetheless, brought about better working conditions for Fairtrade certified plantation workers when compared to other plantation workers in Ecuador. The challenge is that this empowerment is conditional upon the plantation management's decision to continue to value the Fairtrade certification, which will only occur if it remains an attractive reputational and profitable marketing tool for reaching distant consumers.

Schermer (2022) examines the welfare of animals in dairy farming in Austria. Here, consumers value dairy products where the cows are pastured and there are good human-animal relations in small farms. What Schermer documents is a slow, insidious push from retailer standards to remove the traditional approach of tethering in the winter and pasturing in the summer in favor of free stalls where 'sufficient space' is prioritized as the value for cow welfare. This value is remunerated in terms of extra cents per liter by the only two retail chains that purchase products from all across the country. The unintended consequence of such a valuing is widespread change in terms of farm size, structural change and land use, and a change in the cultural landscape whereby the summer tourism suffers from a lack of cows in pastures. These structural shifts are embodied in the shift from cow farmers to dairy farmers who are focused on valuing economies of scale, rather than the welfare of the animals and the humans who are forced to leave profitable markets.

All four of these articles demonstrate how international standards struggle to build sustainable relationships between agriculture designed for distant consumers and the nature (human and non-human) of the territory. In other words, when standards meet values, this does not necessarily lead to a win-win situation in everyday life, but creates new problems, challenges and misfires.

Circulating standards

The interactions of standards with rule-makers, rule-intermediaries and rule-adopters (Abbott, Levi-Faur, & Snidal, 2017) are often the basis for further circulation of standards into other spaces (Loconto & Demortain, 2017). For example, the intrusion of transnational standards into specific locales provoke the making of new, local standards (Foley, 2017; Schouten & Bitzer, 2015). Or competitive relationships form between the multiple standards, which then lead to harmonization endeavors (Loconto & Fouilleux, 2014) or to the formation of new markets (Fouilleux & Loconto, 2017; Reinecke et al., 2012). Moreover, standards also circulate in official spaces of the State when interacting with public regulations (Bartley, 2011). The extent to which values exert influence on these processes and how values are co-constituted through standards' circulation, is still understudied.

Feur (2022) and Sekine (2022) examine the circulation of international standards that have been designed specifically to value cultural and environmental heritage of territories. Feur takes on geographical indications (GI) as an international standard that values a European logic of protecting intellectual property and 'traditional' practices, particularly the food processing techniques of well-defined geographic regions. By tracing the history of how GIs were introduced into international intellectual property regimes, then into Cambodia and Japan, we learn of a neo-colonial approach to governing trade in traditional products that are desired by consumers in the former colonial powers and where technocracy emerges as a federating value for registering GIs around the world. Feur argues that the standardized and piloted approach to the spread of GIs has resulted in a crowding out of useful pre-existing mechanisms of heritage protection that existed in East Asian legal systems. A second effect has been the displacement of exchanges that were embedded in local, moral economies to international trade regimes that value individual GI products that are successfully sold in Europe. A lack of reflexivity in the approach alienates the GIs from the cultural values they are supposed to protect.

Sekine (2022) looks instead at a more recently developed standard called the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS). Created by the FAO in 2002, these standards value traditional agro-ecosystems and associated biodiversity, outstanding landscapes and cultural heritage. Sekine explores how the circulation of this standard into Japan via the intermediation of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) facilitates of process of neo-liberalisation of the standards through its interpretation into a new national level standard. Because Japanese consumers do not recognize, and thus don't value, the GIAHS standard, the ministry has authorised the use of other standards such as GIs, Slow Food Presidia and other territorial labels in order to help promote the sale of GIAHS products. The consequence of this approach, we learn, is the tendency of large farmers to dominate the system. This dominance emerges as there is a culture of

inclusiveness in rural communities where they prefer to offer a diversity of economic opportunities in order to preserve the community connections. This approach has resulted in a shift in production from small-scale polycultures to grain-dominated monocultures that could have two effects: a reduction in the biodiversity that was meant to be protected and the unaffordability of the food that is produced in the GIAHS for local consumers. The valuing of economy over community poses challenges to the use of standards for rural development.

The consequences of governing value(s) and organizing by standards

The articles included in this special issue demonstrate that nature is ‘valued’ and codified into hierarchies of value within all these spaces of standardization with consequences for the use of standards to organize production, sectors, industries, value chains, built environments and nature. Specifically, values can be extended, specified and explicated as well as destroyed or ignored through the use of standards. Put differently, values are not given, but are done (Kjellberg & Mallard, 2013; Muniesa, 2011).

Examining the ways in which standards are deployed to construct and back up values promises insights into the dynamic linkage of the local to the global and vice versa (Congretel et al. 2021). By studying the intersection of value(s) and standards, the SI addresses tensions between global and local social dynamics in an innovative way. Standards are a phenomenon that is a driver and expression of a globalized world, although their consequences are primarily experienced in locally, situated spaces. Neither on a global nor on a local level has the interplay of standards with values received any dedicated attention thus far, particularly not in economic, political or organizational sociology.

The articles in this special issue offer two interesting ways forward in a sociology of standards. First, a number of the articles discussed the importance of intermediation between the values of the standards and the governance effects of these same standards. Recent efforts have been made to understand regulatory intermediation through standards (Abbott et al., 2017), but the articles in this special issue suggest that intermediation is not necessarily occurring through the delegation of authority, but rather through network reconfigurations as standards move from one space to the next. STS-inspired approaches to intermediation – that take into account the human and non-human intermediaries - could be usefully theorized in order to improve our understanding of governing by standards. The second refers to an emerging issue in valuation studies, which is the notion valuelessness (Arnold, 2022; Greeson et al., 2020). Through the invisibilities explored in this special issue, we see that in the prioritization of some values, others are devalued or lost completely. We see this in the unintended consequences like deforestation, inflation of food prices and marginalization of seasonal female workers. Future research could usefully take up this concept in order to better understand how different forms of organization and valuing might change what loses value and how other values might fill that void.

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Résumé

Les normes sont fortement imbriquées avec les valeurs dans les contextes économiques, ce qui va bien au-delà de la valeur économique. La diversité des normes s'exprime dans les espaces locaux où les normes sont élaborées, mises en pratique, mises en circulation et adaptées. Dans ces espaces mutuellement liés et distribués à l'échelle mondiale, on peut analyser comment les normes et les valeurs se rencontrent et les conséquences que cela entraîne pour les individus, les organisations, les communautés et les sociétés. L'examen de différents contextes de production et d'organisation alimentaires apporte de nouveaux éclairages sur les explications et interprétations sociologiques relatives à la manière dont les normes sont guidées par les valeurs et créent de la valeur/des valeurs. Ces perspectives mettent en lumière de nouvelles tensions entre les dynamiques sociales mondiales et locales et offrent deux pistes de réflexion pour la sociologie des normes. La première concerne l'importance de l'intermédiation entre les valeurs des normes et les effets de gouvernance de ces mêmes normes. La seconde se rapporte à la pertinence de l'absence de valeur, lorsque la priorité accordée à certaines valeurs en dévalue d'autres ou les élimine complètement.

Mots-clés

valuation, gouvernance, métriques, normes, organisation

Resumen

Los estándares están fuertemente entrelazados con los valores en los contextos económicos, lo que va mucho más allá del valor económico. La diversidad de los estándares se expresa en los espacios locales donde se elaboran, ponen en práctica, circulan y se adecúan estos estándares. En estos espacios mutuamente vinculados y distribuidos globalmente, podemos analizar las formas en que los estándares y los valores se encuentran entre sí y qué consecuencias tiene esto para los individuos, las organizaciones, las comunidades y las sociedades. A través del análisis de diferentes escenarios de producción y organización de alimentos se aportan nuevas ideas sobre las explicaciones e interpretaciones sociológicas de cómo los estándares están guiados por valores y crean valor(es). Estas ideas ponen de manifiesto nuevas tensiones entre las dinámicas sociales globales y locales y ofrecen dos caminos para avanzar para la sociología de los estándares. El primero sería la importancia de la intermediación entre los valores de los estándares y los efectos en la gobernanza de estos estándares. En segundo lugar, estaría la relevancia de la falta de valor, en la que la priorización de unos valores devalúa otros o los elimina por completo.

Palabras clave

estándares, gobernanza, métricas, organización, valoración