

‘Unsettling issues: valuing public goods and the production of matters of concern’

What are public goods – of any kind – worth? How are they valued, and made valuable? What expertise is involved in their production? Questions over the value of public goods – a sporting championship, the arts, scientific advances or quality of life – figure prominently in our public and political discourse, as politicians and administrators struggle to manage the often competing claims of instrumental, economic reason and intangible, cultural evaluations. We must decide not only what characteristics and ‘goods’ to value, but how to value them, sometimes in the less than fully-realized knowledge that modes of valuation are performative (Austin 1978) of worth.

This themed section considers the making of value and negotiations over what matters – over worth – in the case of a diverse selection of public goods: the scientific knowledge embodied in clinical trials, expertise in government oversight of ‘culture’, and regulations for sustainability. Following the ‘turn to value’ (Stark 2011) and the growing ‘valuographic’ literature (Dussauge et al. 2015) we treat valuation as a process and a practice dependent upon actors, materialities, and multiple ontologies; we recognize the plurality of orders of worth to which all of these actors can appeal (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006); and that the settling, or performing, of a good as valuable is as important as, and often contiguous with, valuation itself. Our papers contribute to the empirical literature on value making and seek to de-naturalise the assumptions of the substantial academic literature on the economic evaluation of public goods, which assumes that agents’ preferences may be extrapolated through inferred, hedonic and contingent valuation methods (Kahneman and Knetsch 1992, Ledyard 1997). More broadly, we provide further theoretical and empirical support for the recognition that valuation is a distinctive sociological phenomenon worthy of attention (Stark 2011).

Our contributions follow a Latourian injunction to discover the production of ‘matters of concern’. Latour’s project seeks to emancipate political discourse, and those who consume it, from what he calls ‘prematurely naturalised objective facts’ (Latour 2004:227). We should, he argues, consider the ongoing and politically charged negotiations that produce matters of fact just part of a much broader expression of concerns. He writes:

Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called states of affairs (Latour 2004:232)

What are matters of concern? What should we notice in the case of public goods?

Prematurely naturalised facts, we suggest, manifest themselves in the economic valuations of public goods, notably through often poorly-examined and tendentious methodologies (Roscoe 2013, Fourcade 2011) and through a hegemonic discourse of economics that recasts social problems as market failure requiring appropriate interventions. Further, we suggest that clashes of valuation practice are sharpest, and most important, where social or public goods – understood broadly as those things that contribute to the non-economic quality of life in our society – encounter the market.

The clash of values between culture and the market was the focus of a workshop, ‘What price creativity?’, held in St Andrews, in December 2012, at which the contributions in this themed section were presented. It asked participants to consider, in varied empirical fields, the consequences of economic valuation on the production of public goods: how it produces and constrains; how agents subvert economic rationality for social or public ends, and whether economic value reduces and corrodes, or sustains and enlivens, public goods. In other words, the contributions in this section seek to demonstrate through empirical study the complexity, messiness, and power-laden nature of value struggles concerning public goods. Contributions also seek to de-naturalise the methodological individualism of economic discourse, and to show that there is more to valuation of ‘singular’ goods than an individual act of judgement (Karpik 2010). Valuation is at the very least an organizational project dependent on communicational and relational forms of work (Moor and Lury 2011). This themed section aims to show our matters of concern give rise to, and are the product of, the organizational project of valuation.

### *Political discourse and the nature of value*

Each paper in the section reveals prolonged negotiations over the nature of public good, worked out in political and public discourse, and in the metrological provisions of government. In the case of ‘culture’, for example, O’Brien (2014) has charted the recent history of cultural policy as a site of a prolonged re-articulation of cultural value: from an elite discourse of art for art’s sake, to culture as a consumable object, and then to culture as

an economic object in the political economy of creative industry. O'Brien's work parallels Chiapello's (2013) account of how notions of 'art for art's sake' are absorbed into the economic projects of 'creative industry'. In this themed section, O'Brien focuses on the person of the bureaucrat, exploring the ethos and identity of the contemporary civil servant against the backdrop of the making of policy in culture.

O'Brien's empirical study of the U.K.'s Department for Culture, Media and Sport provides an empirical elaboration on du Gay's (2008) revival of a Weberian ethic of office. O'Brien sees the identity of the social scientist as mingling with more established, elite narratives of the gentleman generalist. Interviewees appealed to notions of science, evidence and technical skill in establishing their own credibility as reliable civil servants, whose role it is to furnish ministers with the information needed to take decisions. In cultural policy, the dominance of the Treasury-led economic decision-making strengthens this narrative further. Yet there is, according to O'Brien, a real danger that a focus on social science obscures a continued elitism within policy-making. The figure of the gentleman generalist lives on in the sense of who is competent and licensed to do social scientific policy, and the institutional status of places where social science can be done. Moreover, O'Brien shows that the social scientific approach is intertwined with and tempered by the pragmatics of policy: an overweening narrative of scientism obscures the political aspects of policy decisions.

The person of the civil servant in O'Brien's study reflects concerns at stake in a broader conception of the organisation of the social, specifically a prolonged confrontation over the most appropriate mode of organisation and evaluation for the provision of public goods. On the one hand government rules propose a structure motivated by competition and efficiency (Davies 2014), commonly understood within a market framework; on the other is an alternative regime emphasising intangible and intrinsic virtues in the production of common goods. Bureaucratic practicalities and the need for transparency or accountability may equally play a part in the choice of institutional arrangements (Porter 1995). Identifying the discourses that have been 'black boxed' in the making of public goods becomes an important part of the unearthing of matters of concern in this context.

But the intrepid 'valuographer' (Dussauge et al. 2015) sees more than discourses of value. Latour urges us to get beyond a superficial relativism, and develop a stubbornly realist account of the many 'foldings' that give any object its concrete facticity. So we move in this

themed section from the public goods themselves, which loiter in the background as inchoate conceptions, to the stubbornly material matters of concern through which such public goods are – temporarily and ineffectually, as it turns out – instantiated in the daily business of actors. The valuographer, living among his or her ‘people’ to observe the process of valuing, sees it as a practice, and a practical act, itself embedded in and represented by specialized evaluative tools and technologies. Public goods are rendered into numbers, metrics and incentives, and negotiations over value hinge on making things commensurable, or even the same (Espeland and Stevens 1998, MacKenzie 2008). Such endeavours are not always successful; the goods in question may remain stubbornly resistant to economic measures. The valuographic project seeks to understand the metrological foldings through which the matters of concern surrounding public goods are negotiated: economic theorising over public goods is just one of many narratives enrolled in the production of value. Indeed, Muniesa’s (2011) ‘flank movement’ in valuation rejects the dichotomy between human valuer and the material object of valuation altogether.

### *Frictions of value*

This ‘turn to value’ (Stark 2011) attempts to heal the rift in the social sciences left by the historic division of labour between sociology and economics: Stark recounts the story of Talcott Parsons, the sociologist-imperialist who strode along the corridor of Harvard to carve the social world in two. Stark characterises the contemporary symptoms of this rift as a fundamental misalignment between European sociologies of worth, inspired by Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) and their American counterparts:

‘For my colleagues in American economic sociology, values are counterposed to calculation; they are outside and distant from calculation... For my French conventionalist colleagues, on the other hand, orders of worth are not values counterposed to value but are constitutive of value. Orders of worth are the very fabric of calculation, of rationality, of value’ (Stark 2011:11).

European theorists, on the other hand, have understood economies as distinctively ‘moral economies’, and begin from the supposition that moral, or cultural, evaluation is at work in the construction and settling of value. Like Latour, Stark therefore posits the investigation of worth as a Deweyian, pragmatist endeavour, where acts of (financial) estimation depend upon acts of (moral or cultural) esteem. Evaluation based on subjective worth, rather than (supposedly) objective calculation, implies the possibility of overlapping, competing, or even

conflicting orders of value. Valuation proliferates through multiple productions of the social, which we might say, with Law and Urry (2004), are equally valid, equally respectable, but different. Stark calls these conflicts and contests a 'dissonance'.

For Stark (2011), the dissonance between different constructions of worth, driven by rival technologies of valuation or moral and cultural assessments of esteem, provides opportunities for profit. The arbitrage strategies of high finance depend upon dissonance between the evaluative practices of rival trading 'desks' and the overlapping but conflicting productions of value extracted from the same data (Beunza and Stark 2004). Helgesson and Kjellberg (2013), editing a previous themed section in *Journal of Cultural Economy*, identify dialectic between competing matters of concern and draw attention to the ways in which the pragmatics of pricing also enact other values: Trompette's (2013) historical study of French funeral arrangements shows 'political and moral' arbitrage as actors negotiate over a common good, and Beuscart and Mellet (2013) explore two self-contained but overlapping, and thus competing, quality conventions for selling online advertising.

Doganova and Laurent's contribution to this section examines a similar dialectic. It concerns the making of instruments in response to two European directives for sustainability. One directive demands 'best available techniques' to curb emissions, the other a 'mass balance' calculation of energy used. In the first instance, a market space is opened up where new practices and technologies can deliver environmental performance, and in the second local calculative techniques are employed to ensure a parity of inputs and outputs. But in both cases, as Doganova and Laurent show, the emphasis is on local difference and flexibility, as existing practices and standards are brought into the larger grouping, necessitating further layers of metrics and devices. The practice of making regulations, in short, is complicated, not least in terms of qualifying the nature and value of the goods themselves, but it is this complexity that makes regulation a possibility at all.

As Doganova and Laurent put it, 'the ontological construction of economic goods goes hand in hand with normative considerations about what is desirable for the common good.' Callon (2007) renders market failure as an (inevitable) process of overflowing, through which matters of concern and 'concerned groups' are produced. So it is in Doganova and Laurent's contribution, where attempts to frame economic goods overflow, new actors are produced, and modes of value proliferate. In this process of 'keeping things different', public and

private initiatives coexist in different states with differently qualified objects, yet such heterogeneity is necessary for the standards to flourish across the existing practices they meet. Doganova and Laurent distinguish such an approach from the top-down construction of carbon markets, *de novo*, where the emphasis is on commensuration and making things the same (MacKenzie 2008). Dissonance between competing values becomes a source of possibility, as negotiations over what is – ‘the ontological construction of economic goods’ – become crucial matters of concern in the development of sustainable business practice.

### *Valuing knowledge and knowledge of value*

Doganva and Laurent’s study opens up a final avenue for our investigation. As matters of concern develop, as goods multiply, as it becomes apparent that the ontological construction of goods is inseparable from normative considerations of ‘the good’, we begin to recognise that what counts – what is worth knowing – is up for grabs, and that matters of concern, with their attendant power relations (Foucault 1980), may be articulated through the production of knowledge itself.

So what is worth knowing? Helgesson, Lee and Lindén’s contribution considers a dispute of values in the case of clinical trials, as new technologies of bio marking – identifying genetic markers predictive of, for example, resistance to trial drugs – competes with the existing ‘gold standard’ of randomised controlled trials. They examine the dispute as it is worked out in textbooks and scientific journals, an important empirical site where canonical notions of good practice for the medical community are articulated. The values at play are cost, the ethics of patient welfare and risk in the trial, and the epistemic gain as the trial serves its scientific, knowledge producing function. Helgesson, Lee and Lindén identify the trade-offs that must be made between knowledge, safety and cost. The ethics of the randomised control trials, for example, depend upon a genuine uncertainty (clinical equipoise) over which treatment is best for patients, and a truly random, blind allocation. Unfortunately, negotiations between the three present a zero-sum game. Epistemic gains are delivered by a large trial, but at ethical risk, increasing the number subject to potential harm. Large trials are costly, and pre-screened biomarker trials can help cut costs and increase epistemic gains, but pre-screening limits clinical equipoise and, by limiting the randomisation, sacrifices the ethical pillars of a traditional controlled trial. Articulating best practice is by no means straightforward.

In the textbook notions of public goods – medical ethics and scientific knowledge – circulate with those of cost and risk. Helgesson, Lee and Lindén engage with competing notions of worth in the construction of scientific knowledge, and show that these discussions of value begin even at the stage of research design. They recognise that the question of what is worth knowing implicates multiple, rival orders of value, and that the settling of the question necessarily gives rise to matters of concern: we could equally ask what we are prepared to sacrifice first. Helgesson, Lee and Lindén’s study shows, in true valuographical style, how these discussions of worth are embedded in existing scientific knowledge and in social, cultural and economic concerns.

### *Agonistic values and matters of concern*

The contributions in this section seek to open up matters of concern, and their production, in the valuation of public goods. We seek to identify ‘prematurely naturalised objective facts’ and to de-naturalise economic modes of decision-making. Yet valuographic observation suggests that the valuation of public goods is, in practice, complex and contested. It is certainly the case that expert knowledge is at the centre of each of these value struggles, and economics represents a particularly strong form of expertise, but our contribution sure that its implementation is far from straightforward. O’Brien sees officials as beholden to powerful economic narratives, but suggest that implementation of such narratives is far from straightforward or uncontested. Doganova and Laurent see regulators as accepting complexity and a dialectic between actually existing arrangements and theoretical purity, while Helgesson, Lee and Lindén see economic principles as tempered by foundational concerns of medical ethics and knowledge production.

Our contribution support Callon’s (1998) suggestion that economic performativity results in boundary struggles, producing misfires, overflowings, issues and matters of concern: ‘Saying and doing the economy – because all economies are said and done (Çalışkan and Callon 2009) – means entering into the agonistic field where the delimitation-bifurcation between the economy and politics is constantly being debated and played out’ (Callon 2010). The matters of concern to which Latour bids us pay attention are those overflowings, the issues that are produced as rival orders of worth – quality of care, scientific knowledge, culture, sustainability, and ethics clash with the values and tools associated with the market. Our

contributions suggest that, despite the powerful representation of economic values in each empirical setting, the elaboration of matters of concern is a reassuringly messy affair.

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