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## Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud)

# Meat, metrics and market devices: Commensuration infrastructures and the assemblage of ‘the schedule’ in New Zealand's red meat sector



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 27 October 2016

Received in revised form

16 February 2017

Accepted 1 March 2017

Available online 17 March 2017

## Keywords:

Economisation

Markets

Assemblage

Meat

New Zealand

## ABSTRACT

Caliskan (2007) has argued that while we live in worlds that are saturated with a concern with prices, we know very little about how they are fashioned and circulated. This concern with prices, and in particular low prices, has been a reoccurring point of problematisation within New Zealand's red meat sector and the prompt for ongoing work. Yet, as Caliskan suggests more generally for agricultural commodities, we know little of the ways in which prices within the red meat sector are created. Taking this provocation as a starting point this paper explores the regular listing of prices for sheep and beef traditionally known as ‘the schedule’ in New Zealand. The paper frames ‘the schedule’ as form of market device and traces the complex filigree of associations that are assembled to make it durable. In tracing these associations what emerges are wider metrological assemblages performed through the complex and unstable interaction of market devices, price, agency and materialities. What this suggests is that because price is often a key metric of problematisation, we need to develop our understanding of the materialities, artefacts and infrastructures that are assembled to make prices possible, and the different possibilities that those things enact.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite serious moral and environmental qualms about the consumption of meat, it remains central to the lives of billions of people. The industry that has developed to supply meat has its origins in the reconciliation of the tensions between perishability, variability and industrial processing that began in the late nineteenth century, and which saw meat companies amongst the very first multinational, industrially scaled makers of globalised commodity markets (Horowitz, 2006; Perren, 2006). It is an industry that has continually sought out new sources of supply, and transformed animals, people and environments in the process; and it is an industry whose approaches to relationships such as profitability, labour relations, animal welfare, and human health have generated continual criticism. It is also a globalised industry that is deeply embedded in New Zealand's past, current and future economic trajectory, and where meat prices have been of enduring anxiety for New Zealand farmers, processors, consumers and politicians.

The ebb and flow of meat prices are recorded in websites, newspapers and reports, and the prospects for their improvement

and the threat of their decline widely discussed. This concern is not unusual. Rhythms of storms, drought, overproduction, speculation, and conflict and their impact on food prices are a constant concern for farmers and others across the globe. Yet, the price of meat, the object around which these anxieties cluster is to a large extent a ‘matter of fact’ whose naturalism is taken for granted. In New Zealand, over the last two decades relative declines in meat prices, relative to returns from alternative land uses such as dairying have prompted reflection within the meat industry about the causes of these declines prices and the potential for structural transformation within the industry to improve them. These concerns have been rehearsed in reports such as *Meat and Wool New Zealand's (2009) Your Industry Your Future*, the *Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (2009), Meat –the Future*, *Deloitte's (2011) Red Meat Sector Strategy Report*, and the recent *Meat Industry Excellence (Meat Industry Excellence, 2015) Red Meat Industry: Pathways to Long-Term Sustainability*. Variable meat prices has provoked political campaigns, such as organised by the Meat Industry Excellence (MIE) group to further aspirations for increased farmer control of meat processing and the rationalisation of competition between the processing companies. Highly volatile meat prices have also been translated into new research programmes such as the label Primary Growth Partnerships (PGPs)

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which bring together scientists, farmers, processors and the government with the aim of improving returns to farmers, processors and the country more generally. Price is the object and driver of anxiety in all these endeavours, and this ubiquity reflects Caliskan's (2007) observation that the modern world is saturated with an attention to, and discussion of, prices.

Yet, as Caliskan (2007, 2010b) also argues, despite an endemic concern for prices we have a limited understanding of how prices are fashioned, and in particular the myriad devices that mediate the production of prices. Instead, as is evident in the reports listed above, within which the problematisation of meat prices is a constant refrain, meat prices are almost inevitably framed through the abstraction of a 'market price' without any sense of the rich social, political, technological and culinary relationships through which meat's material qualities are made calculable, comparable, and ultimately economically valuable. Consequently, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature that asks us to question naturalistic accounts of prices, and to instead begin understanding prices as particular achievements that only exist, circulate, and do work within particular technoscientific assemblages. To ground this investigation this paper focuses on the making of lamb prices. While compared to chicken, pork and beef, lamb is a relatively minor meat in terms of its global trade and consumption, it has been both central to the New Zealand's meat industry, and the historic development of globalised networks of meat production, processing and consumption. Consequently, the importance of lamb to New Zealand, and the importance of lamb to the emergence of contemporary, globalised meat markets make it a particularly strategic commodity from which to begin understanding the assemblage of meat prices.

In New Zealand's red meat sector a key mechanism through which lamb prices are assembled is via the creation and circulation of 'the schedule', and it is with this that the paper starts because of its ubiquity as a point of reference for discussions about meat prices, and its seeming stability as a market device. We begin with a description of 'the schedule' at a particular point in time, but in order to question its taken-for-granted character the paper then sets about conceptually reframing it. Drawing on a discussion of Caliskan and Callon's (2009; 2010) work on economization, 'the schedule' is reframed as the tip of a largely invisible commensuration assemblage that enables red meat to be transformed into an economic object. Building on this idea of a commensuration assemblage the paper traces key elements in the making of this assemblage, beginning with work to pacify lamb through breeding and grading before turning to consider how lamb has been valued, the technologies that have made valuation possible, and the implications of the emergence of new valuation devices for the distribution of price making agency within meat markets.

## 2. 'The schedule'

Orsman's (1997, p.696) *Dictionary of New Zealand English* defines 'the schedule' as 'the regularly published list of prices offered by meat companies for various weights and grades of meat'. While the regular listing of meat prices is not unique to New Zealand, it is a distinctive part of the New Zealand's agricultural markets. Orsman's definition is based on Belshaw's (1936) survey of New Zealand agriculture where it was used it but without reference to its origins. Searching through Papers Past, a database of New Zealand newspapers, reveals that the phrase was not used in relation to meat prices prior to World War One (WWI). However, in February 1915 the New Zealand government appointed itself as the sole purchaser of frozen meat on behalf of the United Kingdom government (Massey, 1915). Accompanying the announcement of these new purchasing arrangements, also known as 'the commandeer',

was a price list for various types and weights of meat under the title 'Schedule of F.O.B prices' (see Fig. 1). In this moment a new calculative device was made visible, one that erased geographic differences and created for the first time a national price for New Zealand meat exports.

Rhetorically the contemporary 'schedule' traces a direct lineage to that moment of emergence in February 1915. Contemporary talk of 'the schedule' and 'schedule prices' territorialises a national meat economy in the same way as the list of prices that was gazetted in 1915. However, the talk of a national meat market, hides, suggests Barber (2008, 2014), the significant geographical fragmentation embedded in 'the schedule's' fine detail and the complex relationships between the various actors involved in the setting and realisation of meat prices. This complexity can be glimpsed if we examine a week's 'schedule' as published on the financial news website [interest.co.nz](http://interest.co.nz) (see Fig. 2).

While 'the schedule' has had the effect of creating a national meat space, 'the schedule' as a singular object does not exist. The schedule itself is not a price, but rather a matrix based on increasing levels of differentiation. The 'schedule' in Fig. 2 is only one of a series of schedules each of which are devoted respectively to different meat species. In turn our sheep schedule is further differentiated according to varying categories including: lamb, ewe and mutton. The differentiation continues if we focus on lamb, where a further set of distinctions exists primarily based on lamb classes (Y,P,T,F and C) but also categories that reflect factors such as age (lamb, hogget or mutton), purpose ('Store', for fattening rather than immediate slaughter) and destination ('Local trade' rather than export). Moreover, if we focus solely on the Y class lambs that now form the basis of New Zealand's lamb exports then we discover further price layers organised by categories of weight, but also differentiated by processing company and the location of different processors' plants. Then, we have the further complication of what parts of the animal that these prices actually refer to. For example in the case of Alliance the schedule price for a Y class lamb potentially includes an extra payment for the lamb's wool and pelt, while in contrast the SFF price for Y grade lambs in the North Island includes the wool, and for Taylor Preston their North Island price includes a premium for short wool. Moreover, while most of the prices are spot prices for that week, we can also see a range of prices for longer-term supply contracts for specific specifications of lamb. Consequently, what this cursory look at the November 2014 schedule for Y class lambs shows is that rather than making a single price for lamb visible, what has been made partly visible is instead a complex matrix of relationships between price, location, processor and specification. The question then is how we can begin to uncover these relationships, the devices that make them possible, and the assemblages that bind them all together?

## 3. Assembling economic objects

'The schedule' thus described gives us a glimpse of the operation of the market for lamb in New Zealand, and the layers of price making that exist in that market. Caliskan and Callon (2009) argue that the wider social sciences have long had a concern with the organisation, operation, and significance of markets. Within the social sciences different weight has been given to the relative significance of individuals, societies or institutions, but these different approaches have tended to share an epistemology that has maintained an ontological split between what is economic and what is not. However, work building on the contributions of Polanyi (1944) and Granovetter (1985) has criticised this split arguing instead that no such ontological distinction can be easily made or sustained. The result has been the development of an understanding of markets as constituting particular, time and space contingent knots of

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