



Analysis

Legitimizing farmers' new knowledge, learning and practices through communicative action: Application of an agro-environmental policy



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of communication in the process that guides economic actors to integrate the moral obligations implied by adopting sustainability principles in their action choices and to reexamine their practices. We analyze two approaches to implementing agro-environmental measures that encourage farmers to preserve water resources. Verbal interactions between farmers and agricultural advisors, who are part of these policy programs, are analyzed drawing on Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. The discourse analysis used here shows that communicative action encouraged participants to re-examine the validity of the technical, experiential, and normative knowledge that legitimized their reasons for acting. This study brings to light the fact that, in the context of a business primarily oriented towards making a profit, committing to sustainable development does not only operate in technical terms; such a commitment also requires collective validation of the effectiveness of alternative farming practices.

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1. Introduction

Society's expectations of agriculture have progressively changed in nature, and the criteria used for evaluating farming have tended to be redefined. For society, farmers are no longer expected to simply satisfy the food needs of a growing population; increasingly, they are also asked to contribute to producing and reproducing environmental goods and services such as maintaining biodiversity (both flora and fauna), providing landscape amenities, and preserving water and soil quality (OECD, 2013, p. 473). Within the European Union, this trend has resulted in changes to public agricultural policies. The 'greening' of the Common Agricultural Policy is now on the agenda (European Commission, 2013). The stated goal is to promote agricultural production systems that are more diversified, self-sufficient in terms of energy, better adapted to local contexts, and that better preserve natural resources. If these proposals are adopted, they will not be able to reconcile agriculture and ecology without first, a profound reorganization of the ways in which the farming profession is conceptualized (Rémy et al., 2006), and, second, without an equally profound transformation in the normative frameworks on which these conceptions are based. In particular, establishing a new model of sustainable farming based on the ecological modernization of agriculture (Horlings and Marsden, 2011) depends on the ability and motivation of actors (especially farmers and farming advisors) to question the validity of the technical knowledge they inherited from the post-war model of intensive

farming.¹ Establishing a new model also presupposes that farmers agree to include society's new environmental concerns in their action choices (Koochafkan et al., 2012), by adopting behavior norms that take into account the environmental interests and values of other actors.

Understanding the ways in which preferences and behavior may be influenced by moral considerations requires a significant conceptual and methodological transformation. We therefore need a better understanding of how collective moral values and individual interests come together, confront each other, or hybridize to give rise to new regimes of decision-making (Norgaard, 2004; Douguet et al., 2007). In economics, some authors (Norgaard, 2007; Zografos and Howarth, 2008) argue that such an understanding requires taking into account the role of deliberation in updating actors' preferences and reasons for acting. Deliberation is viewed as a process of discussion, through which participants compare and contrast their points of view and arbitrate between multiple competing values (Howarth and Wilson, 2006). Values and preferences are considered to be the result of a social construction resulting from interactive debate. For Lo and Spash (2013), since deliberation involves reasoning at the group level, it therefore serves as an essential foundation for collective decision-making. Deliberation has the virtue of helping 'moralize' preferences, because it encourages

¹ Such as the massive use of chemical inputs, destroying hedgerows and earthbanks, filling in ditches, and regularly turning the soil.

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each participant to engage in collective reflection about a common good (Wilson and Howarth, 2002). Through the deliberative process, the search for collective interests or the common good takes precedence over individual interests. These studies, and others (O'Hara, 1996; Meppem and Bourke, 1999; Howarth and Wilson, 2006; Spash, 2008; Dietz et al., 2009; Vatn, 2009; Lo, 2013), pay particular attention to discursive exchanges between the parties involved in deliberation, since group deliberation cannot be understood without analyzing the language through which it occurs. Thus, they highlight the usefulness of Habermas' (1981) theory of communicative action for understanding how the mechanism of discussion may facilitate the actors' adoption of a moral stance.

We also draw on this Habermasian model to explore the potential of the communicative process to change individual preferences and to help actors move beyond purely individual interests. To do so, we examined the implementation of an environmental incentive program (an agro-environmental measure, hereafter AEM) in two areas of the Midi-Pyrenees Region of France. These measures, created in the European Union starting in 1992, are voluntary, contractual programs designed to encourage farmers to preserve natural resources such as water by paying them for this environmental service. Our analysis focuses on discussions between farmers having voluntarily signed the AEM contract and the farming advisors who supported them during the contract's term (5 years). Our primary goal was to study the ways in which discussion and interaction among the actors influenced their adoption of new forms of agronomic and economic reasoning that better preserved water quality.

This article presents two new contributions to the field of deliberative economics:

- First, in contrast to the majority of studies cited, this paper examines debate between actors from the business world. Rather than analyzing interactions within a public forum bringing together a variety of citizens, we focus on a professional community (farmers, farming advisors, farming cooperatives). In the communicative process studied here, the moral question is inextricably linked to maintaining the economic viability of the business. In this way, we were able to test the hypothesis that integrating new moral values into a business' action choices is facilitated when the actors feel that such integration does not compromise the economic performance of the production system.
- Second, our research method, based on semi-structured interviews, analyses a communicative process that is not based on a face-to-face exchange. Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogic concept of language (1986), we consider that any discourse, even if it is not spoken in a face-to-face interaction, is always a reaction–response to the discourses of others (agreeing or disagreeing). As such, it is necessarily an integral part of an uninterrupted communication process (Voloshinov, 1986). Utterances such as “I was discussing this issue with X,” or reported speech, such as “When you hear that... (followed by reported words),” clearly show that the people involved are thinking and speaking within the framework of a dialogic relationship to others, and not in the isolated manner of a sole individual (even though this fact is not necessarily explicitly stated by the actors). In adopting Bakhtin's perspective, we view the utterances in the discourses of people interviewed as units that constitute a delayed–response communication.

The article has three sections. Section 1 presents the conceptual framework used for analyzing the deliberative processes among economic actors, primarily based on Habermas' communicative action theory (Habermas, 1981, 1983). The second section presents the two empirical cases studied. We describe in detail the methodology used to understand the deliberation among actors that was generated by the AEM program's implementation. This method is based on lexicometric analyses (Reinert, 1983; Lebart et al., 1994) applied to the discourses of farmers and advisors collected during semi-

structured interviews. The results of this textual analysis are described in the third section. These results enable us to assess the influence of intercommunication on (i) constructing alternative farming practices and new ways of organizing farmers' work with fewer chemicals, (ii) changing the norms and values underlying farming practices, and (iii) adopting a way of thinking that takes into account the concerns of other users of natural resources (here, water).

2. Communication as a Process of Moral Commitment to Collective Action in Transitioning Towards Sustainable Agriculture

This section begins by describing the particular issues of interactive discussion that are involved in a business's moral commitment, here a farming business. Then, drawing on Habermas' theory of communicative action (1981), we uncover the deeper mechanisms at work in deliberation. In particular, we delineate the ways in which communicative praxis may contribute to changing farmers' preferences. Finally, Bakhtin's theories (1986) are used to explain our study of delayed–response communication.

2.1. Deliberation and Moral Commitments in Farm Businesses

Authors such as O'Neill and Spash (2000), Vatn (2009), and Hodgson (2012) underscore the eminently moral dimension of choices regarding the natural environment. This moral aspect is explained by the fact that many natural resources are common goods, that a plurality of environmental values exist, and that these have weaker or stronger incommensurability (O'Neill, 1997; Martinez-Alier et al., 1998; Munda, 2008). Moreover, several scholars (Vatn, 2005; Bromley and Päävola, 2002; O'Neill, 2011; Hodgson, 2012) argue that the success of any sustainable development action is conditional on actors having a shared understanding of the norms of action, which have universally-agreed upon value. Reaching this understanding requires that each person detach from his or her own individual goals in order to take into account others' interests. Breaking the tight link between individual welfare and one's choice of action is termed ‘commitment’ by Sen (1977, 2002). For Sen, as for a number of other scholars in ecological economics (O'Hara, 1996; Douai, 2009; Lo and Spash, 2013), recourse to open and free deliberation among actors creates the necessary conditions for this commitment. By creating a context favorable to the coordination of interpersonal actions (Lo, 2013), deliberation encourages people to call on a kind of reasoning that privileges the ‘we’ over the ‘I’ (Vatn, 2005). Thus, deliberation promotes an awareness of personal responsibility towards others and, in this way, fosters a better integration of collective values into individual action choices (Sen, 2009).

We seek here to modify and complement these arguments in order to take into account the specific challenge that moral commitment represents for a business person, since this commitment is only conceivable on the condition that it remains compatible with the company's continued economic profitability (Hartman et al., 2007; Pies et al., 2009). Thus, in the specific cases studied here of farm businesses, we argue that farmers' adoption of a kind of reasoning that is sensitive to others' concerns about the environment does not occur only in moral terms. Rather, such adoption requires, first, that farmers be convinced that alternative practices exist and are sufficiently effective, so that they can reduce the negative impact on natural resources without affecting their profits. Second, embracing this new way of thinking also necessitates a re-conceptualization of the profession of ‘farmer’ around the new skills needed when moving away from automatically using chemicals to fight pests (for example, observation, planning ahead, and reactivity).² Therefore, we consider that the purpose of

² The professional expertise of farmers, as it was conceptualized in the 1960s, is largely based on automatically implementing the technical protocols that they have been given, without question or reflection. The use of preventative chemical treatments in this framework is thus considered as the surest way to limit crop loss.

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