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Markets, values and politics of performativity

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## ***Introduction***

Recent work within sociology and marketing has highlighted the potential import of ideas on markets (Callon, 1998c; MacKenzie, 2003; Helgesson et al., 2004). Using the concept of ‘performativity’ (Callon, 1998b) these efforts have suggested that economic and other theories do not simply “describe an existing external ‘economy’, but brings that economy into being: economics performs the economy, creating the phenomena it describes” (MacKenzie and Millo, 2003:108). This approach has treated markets as the on-going results of practices, producing a view of markets as ways of organizing that facilitate economic exchanges. In line with this view, it has been suggested that by organizing and shaping exchanges in particular ways, markets could take on multiple forms (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006).<sup>1</sup> This means that there is scope for various actors to engage more or less explicitly in shaping the way in which a particular market is being organized. As part of such efforts, theoretically informed understandings of how markets (should) work are likely to play a part both in identifying relevant others and affecting their doings. In short, markets become political, the scenes of various and shifting coalitions (confer Arndt, 1979a; Arndt, 1979b; Stidsen, 1979).

The purpose of this paper is to explore this political aspect of market shaping particularly as it pertains to performativity. By doing so, the paper complements and expands recent theoretical efforts addressing how market practices configure markets (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006; Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007; Araujo, 2007; Callon et al., 2007). The paper also complements previous efforts to address politics within marketing (Arndt, 1979b; Stern and Reve, 1980; Arndt, 1983; Achrol et al., 1983; Hutt et al., 1986) in at least two ways. First, we suggest that politics should not be regarded as a separate process, taking place in parallel to the regular economic exchange activities, but that the ongoing production of markets involves political action (confer Fligstein, 1996). Second, we explicitly attend to politics in relation to how ideas can shape markets, something that hitherto has received little attention.

Three sections follow this introduction. First, we briefly introduce the notion of *performativity* and how this research program implies a shift in our conception of politics to *ontological*

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<sup>1</sup> Goodman (1979) made a similar point concerning the variability of markets when arguing for a fundamental similarity between “domesticated markets” and “free markets.”

*politics*. This, in turn, implies that values become central to *political market-ing*, that is, to the political aspects of the realization of markets. Second, we identify and provide illustrations of three ways in which new values may be introduced into market practice: *appropriation*, *reform* and *representation*. We then use a fourth illustration to discuss how current market practices may affect attempts to employ these different ways. We conclude the paper by discussing the general issue of when issues become political in the light of our findings.

### ***Performativity, some preliminaries***

We use the phrase “the performativity of economics” to refer to the possibility that ideas, theories, and models about markets and other forms of economic governance not only describe an existing, external economy, but that they may contribute to bring that economy into existence (Callon, 1998b; Callon, 2007; MacKenzie, 2004; MacKenzie and Millo, 2003). This is the central premise of the performativity program as it has developed at the intersection of Science and Technology Studies, Economic Sociology and Marketing. In its most general form the argument can be expressed as an assertion that markets are the continuous outcomes of practices that are informed by some theory or other. Within marketing similar suggestions have been made, yet without constituting a central argument in marketing theory. For instance, Stidsen (1979:78) asserted that: “A marketing plan is not just a plan for entering or exploiting a market – it is also a plan for altering a market.”

A few important clarifications are in place: First, our basic assumption regarding performativity is that there are no inevitable effects that follow from the use of either language or theory (confer Butler, 1997; Callon, 2007). If the sociology of translation has demonstrated anything it is the importance of those whose participation is required to produce effects, but whose participation also is highly uncertain and which regularly transforms that which is being produced (Latour, 1986). Second, any effort to bring into existence the world implied by a specific theory or model (theoretical statement) is likely to meet, face and/or interfere with other such efforts (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006). Third, as illustrated by recent work on multiplicity (Mol, 1999; Mol, 2002), multiple versions of the world may well coexist without necessarily leading to conflict or breakdown (see also, Sjögren and Helgesson, 2007).

## Politics of performativity

In a recent contribution, Michel Callon suggested that a working market regularly (re-) produces a version of the distinction between politics, economics and science (Callon, forthcoming). This it must do, or so Callon argues, in order to carve out a realm for the economic exchanges to take place within it: What issues are to be resolved through economic exchange, techno-scientific work and political action, respectively? Where these dividing lines are drawn is never given, arbitrary, nor solidified once and for all.

As suggested by Andrew Barry (2002) it can be useful to distinguish between politics – understood as the specialist activities involved in international, national and local government – and the political – understood as that which opens up the possibility for disagreement. In short, there is a need to distinguish between the character of specific activities in specific situations and their regular “labeling” as scientific, economic, or political. By doing so, we can more easily appreciate how science indeed is “politics by other means” (Latour, 1988). This also helps us to distinguish our take on *political market-ing* from previous efforts to relate marketing to politics.<sup>2</sup> Such efforts have tended to regard politics as a separate process, taking place in parallel to the regular economic exchange activities (e.g. Hutt et al., 1986). This suggests that there is a special type of politics that pertains to markets and that it is possible to list the various activities that belong to it. Whether the activities included under the label are *political* is quite another issue; many activities that are commonly termed politics can have decidedly anti-political effects, for instance limiting debate and suppressing contestation (Barry, 2002).

What are the political implications of the assertion that markets are on-going achievements that to some extent are shaped by the ideas actors entertain about them? We suggest that the

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<sup>2</sup> *Political marketing* (without a hyphen) is a term employed to refer to the utilization of marketing skills (such as research methods, communication and branding tools) for political campaigns, or the likening of politics with a market for analytical purposes. Often the two go together. *Political market-ing* (with a hyphen), we suggest, is concerned with the political aspects of the realization of markets (and other economic orders). This is, at any rate, our concern in this paper. Hence, we are interested in the process through which economic orders are being realized and in particular the political aspects, if any, of this process.

major consequence of the performativity thesis is a transformation of the term politics to *ontological politics* (Mol, 1999). First, ontological politics starts from the premise that there are no clear points at which decisions are made; what is being shaped is characterized by *emergence*. This is relatively straightforward in relation to markets, since markets tend to be portrayed as emergent phenomena in many theoretical traditions. There are no clear, singular points at which the market form is decided on. Second, ontological politics is sensitive to the idea that the versions of reality that are being realized affect other things; that there may be interference between efforts to shape the world. Thus, it is not always easy to identify what is at stake. In a market setting we can easily imagine how an effort to realize a particular version of a market can have consequences for other such efforts. Efforts to foster (static) competition by standardizing the objects of exchange might, for instance, interfere with efforts to differentiate and evolve the objects of exchange.

Third, the term ontological politics emphasizes that there may be various ways of aligning such different versions. We are not dealing with parallel universes but with overlapping configurations. As a consequence, particular versions may be characterized by mutuality, i.e. they may reinforce and support each other. Fourth and finally, Mol suggests that ontological politics is concerned more with the question of effects – what is to be achieved – than relative effectiveness or efficiency of alternative ways of achieving. Hence, questions concerning the *values* that are guiding efforts to shape markets (and other economic orders) become central.

### Struggling to perform value(s)

It is an established view within economics that markets perform valuations. This can also be readily observed in for instance auction markets, where current (and present) supply of and demand for a specific product is translated into a price. However, several recent studies of auction markets suggest that the valuations being performed depend on the specific algorithms employed for reaching that price (see, for instance, Jap, 2007). Still, markets seem to perform valuations. A complication here is the fact that many different values may be associated with a specific market. That is, besides prices, markets may be employed to produce specific values in other dimensions. Standard textbooks in microeconomics and industrial organization usually suggest a list of values that are closely related to markets, including: allocation efficiency, equity, price stability, full employment, etc. Other (market)

theories emphasize, at the very least in part, other values. For instance, the IMP/market-as-networks tradition has tended to emphasize effectiveness alongside efficiency.

Besides the variety of values that can be associated with a market, empirical markets also display different distributions of how various values are realised. That is, the way in which certain values are achieved may differ dramatically between markets. In some markets, product quality and safety issues are realised through with the help of devices related to government regulation and monitoring, whereas such values in other markets may be realised through activities performed by the sellers and buyers. Indeed, what is to be regarded as a product safety issue (and hence something that could or should be regulated) is itself a matter of negotiation and change.

Finally, we would like to highlight that any effort to introduce and have a market perform a new/other value must make do/handle the current realization of that market. This may affect “where” issues can be introduced. For instance, considerable work may be needed in order to shift an issue from being resolved through competition for exchange to being the subject of regulatory activity, or vice versa. In the next section we will present three general ways in which new or other values can be introduced in markets.

### ***Three ways of introducing new/other values in markets***

How can new or other values be introduced to guide the organizing of markets? Employing the conceptualization of markets as constituted by practice (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007), we have identified three distinct ways which we will illustrate with empirical cases/examples: appropriation, reform, and representation.

#### **Appropriating values in market exchanges**

Our first example we take from a classic marketing campaign for Coca-Cola launched in 1971: the Hilltop commercial featuring the song “I’d like to buy the world a Coke” recorded by the New Seekers (see Figure 1, below, for three screenshots from the film). The ad was based on the idea of adding a new value to the product; that of bringing people together. In

retrospect, this was clearly expressed by Bill Backer, the creative director for the Coca-Cola account at McCann-Erickson at the time:



**Figure 1. Still photos from the “Hilltop” ad by McCann-Erickson for Coca-Cola. Source [http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/presscenter/presskit\\_hilltop\\_image\\_library.html](http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/presscenter/presskit_hilltop_image_library.html).**

[I] began to see a bottle of Coca-Cola as more than a drink. . . . [I] began to see the familiar words, "Let's have a Coke," as . . . a subtle way of saying, "Let's keep each other company for a little while." . . . that was the basic idea: to see Coke not as it was originally designed to be—a liquid refresher—but *as a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples*, a universally liked formula that would help to keep them company for a few minutes. (Backer, 1993, italics added)

This illustrates a first way of introducing new values into markets. The new value is simply (well, figuratively speaking) added to those other values that supposedly are important when evaluating the good in relation to other goods. This is done without altering the way in which the exchanges are carried out; the new value is introduced into the existing mode of exchange. The central process here is the qualification of goods; how a product or service is qualified as a good, i.e. as an object of exchange (confer Callon et al., 2002). This type of value-infusion can of course be resisted by others, such as prospective buyers and competing sellers. This allows us to identify at least two potential ways in which controversies concerning value appropriation can arise. The first is through competition, defined as the parallel striving for a common goal, consumer patronage (Simmel, 1955 [1908]). As long as competition remains the sole mechanism for resolving such controversies, then appropriation is “contained” within exchange practice. However, as is well known, this type of effort can also lead to public

critique, for instance based on the idea that certain areas are or should be “off limits” for commoditization (Klein, 2000; Heath and Potter, 2006).

### Reforming the values governing markets

The possibility that attempts at appropriation may result in public debate leads us to our second illustration of how values may be introduced in markets: through reform. There are of course numerous examples of this, but we will briefly relate one that is particularly topical at present: the issue of corporate social responsibility. The figures below illustrate two parallel efforts to influence the norms governing economic exchange in markets, one public initiative by the UK government (Figure 2) and one NGO initiative by Amnesty International (Figure 3). The government initiative clearly states: “We have an ambitious vision for UK businesses to consider the economic, social and environmental impacts of their activities...” Similarly, Amnesty states that they are asking companies to “commit to human rights in their statements of business principles ... and by producing explicit human rights policies.”

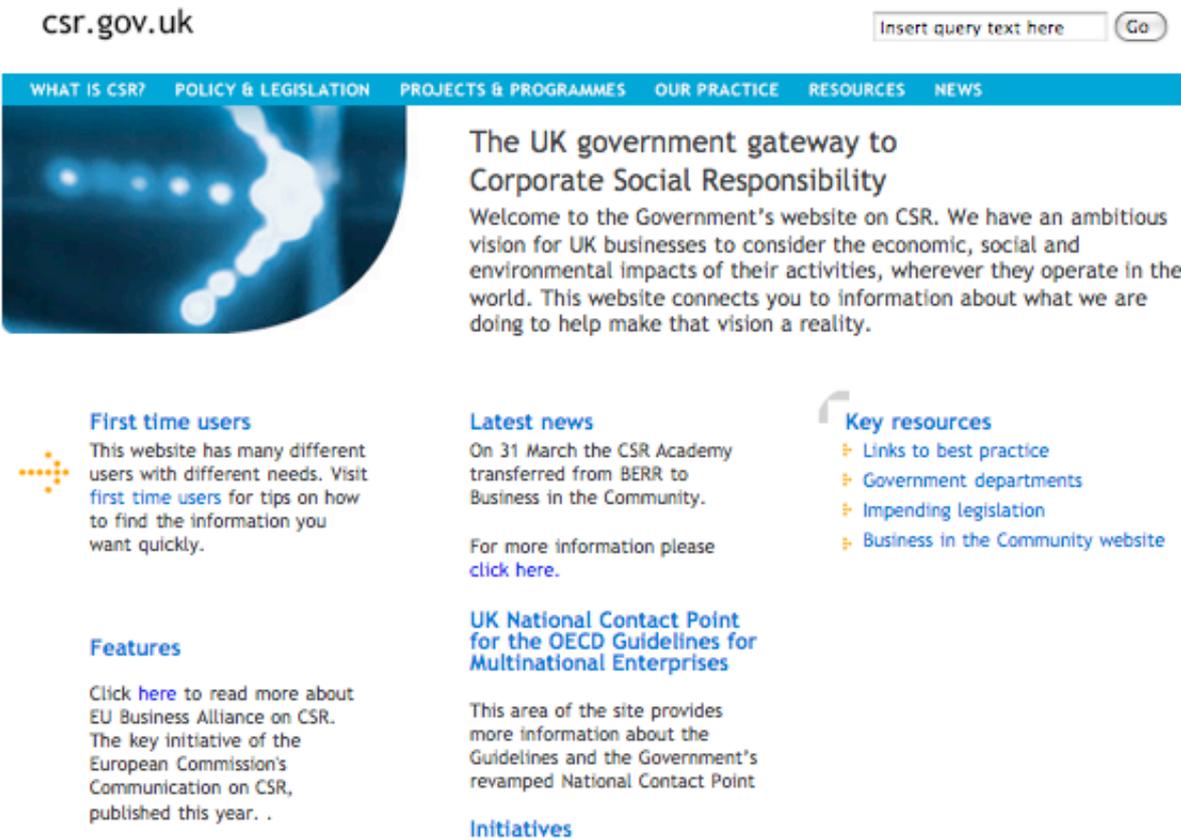


Figure 2. The UK government gateway to CSR. Source: <http://www.csr.gov.uk/>.

Both these initiatives illustrate how actors may attempt to introduce and establish new values to guide exchange practice. Both organisations are working to establish new values as norms for economic exchange. A central process for succeeding in this is public debate. Of course, there may also exist formalized practices for the ratification of such new values, for instance through legislative or corporate governance procedures. Still, public debate has shown to be a very important aspect of this type of value infusion. For these attempts at reform, we may also identify one important vehicle for resolving controversies in the forming of alliances between various interest groups. As with attempts at appropriating values, this type of reform activity has not been untouched by critique. Primarily, it has been argued that reform efforts of this kind politicize markets. The article “The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits” by Milton Friedman constitutes a prime example of this line of reasoning (Friedman, 1970). It also underscores that this is a line of reasoning that takes as its point of departure a very particular and limited view of what a market is.

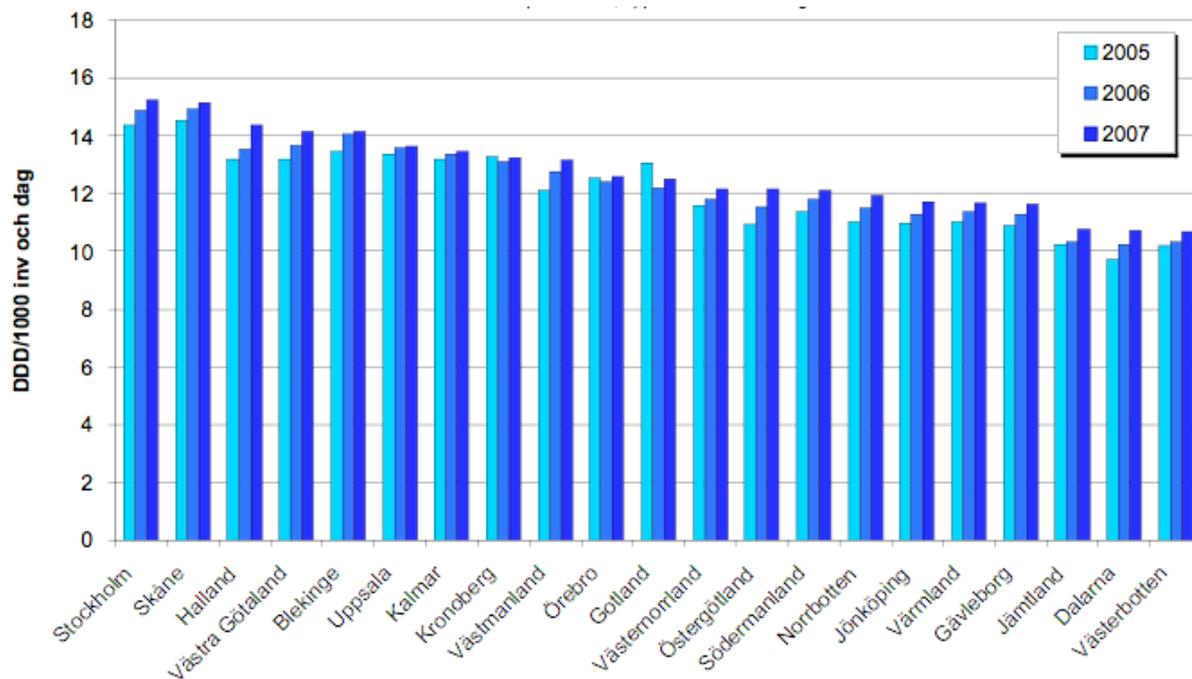
The screenshot shows the Amnesty International website. At the top, there is a yellow navigation bar with the Amnesty International logo on the left and links for 'FOR MEDIA', 'LIBRARY', 'CAMPAIGNS', and 'CONTACT US' on the right. Below the navigation bar, there are language options: 'العربية', 'Français', and 'Español', along with a search bar and 'Register' and 'Login' links. A secondary navigation bar contains links for 'HOME', 'WHO WE ARE', 'HOW YOU CAN HELP', 'LEARN ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS' (highlighted), 'NEWS & UPDATES', and 'STAY INFORMED'. The main content area is titled 'BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS' and includes a breadcrumb trail: 'Home > Learn About Human Rights > Human rights by topic > Business and Human Rights'. The text discusses how globalization has changed the world, presenting challenges for human rights protection. It mentions that economic players, especially trans-national companies, have gained unprecedented power and influence. A section titled 'What is Amnesty International doing?' describes the organization's work on economic players, including trans-national companies and international financial organizations. It states that through research and analysis, Amnesty International aims to highlight human rights abuses in which companies are implicated and how governments fail to prevent these abuses or hold companies to account. The organization is campaigning for global standards on business and human rights and stronger legal frameworks at both national and international level to hold companies to account for their human rights impact. Finally, it lists four ways Amnesty International asks companies to promote respect for human rights: using their influence in support of human rights, including a specific commitment to human rights in their statements of business principles and codes of conduct, producing explicit human rights policies and ensuring they are integrated, monitored and audited across their operations and beyond borders, and putting in place the necessary internal management systems to ensure that human rights policies are acted upon. On the right side, there is a 'RELATED INFORMATION' section with a 'Print' and 'Email page' option, and a 'Tags' section listing 'Business And Human Rights' and a link to 'Breakthrough in Canadian indigenous rights flashpoint Amnesty ...' dated 14 March 2008.

**Figure 3. The Amnesty International “Business and human rights” initiative. Source: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/business-and-human-rights>.**

### Representing the values produced by markets

The possibility that different ideas about what a market is may affect how the introduction of new values is received provides a lead-in to our third example of how new or other values may be introduced in markets: representation. Since actors can entertain radically different ideas concerning what markets are and what they should do, the ways in which markets performance are may differ accordingly. One example of the import of new representations of markets can be had from a current Swedish case: the question of whether or not to increase the possibility of patients to choose their health care provider. This development has been triggered by market ideas in the sense that free choice of healthcare provider is assumed to lead to increased availability and therefore improved healthcare through competition between private and public healthcare providers.

After the introduction of this new system in the Swedish county of Halland in 2006 (in itself a result of a reform effort) a survey of antibiotics consumption showed a dramatic increase for Halland (see Figure 4, below). “The use of penicillin has increased by 25% in Halland this winter. Sensational, says Mats Erntell, County Medical Officer at the Department for Communicable Disease Control, and suspects there is a connection to free choice of healthcare provider.” (Söderström, 2007, trans.) One interpretation of the figures, then, was that free choice of healthcare provider led to increased prescriptions of antibiotics. This in turn could be used to construct a chain of events suggesting that free choice of healthcare provider increased the risk of new breeds of multi-resistant bacteria emerging. Hence, free choice of health care providers not only increased availability but also something less sought after. As a reaction to these indications, some voices have suggested that the medical profession must issue clearer instructions and enforce rules for the prescription of antibiotics.



**Figure 4. Prescribed antibiotics in Swedish counties, 2005-2007. Figures for Halland are found in the third column from the left. Source: <http://www.strama.se/dyn/,79,.html>.**

Although the specific issue accounted for above is far from settled, it illustrates how new values may be introduced in markets by representing the consequences of economic exchanges in new ways. What is it that is being produced by the economic exchanges taking place in this particular market? The central process here is detecting and measuring what Callon has labelled overflows in relation to a particular framing of a market (Callon, 1998a). While the issue of whether or not the introduction of free patient choice of health care provider leads to the emergence of new breeds of multi-resistant bacteria still is unsettled, we may still say something about how the issue may be resolved. Several studies of scientific controversies have suggested that they tend to be resolved through the establishment of durable chains of translations (Latour, 1987). That is, time and effort will be spent on strengthening and/or weakening the association between the two observations. A complementary way of resolving the issue was also indicated in the example, namely to treat it as a professional issue; something to be handled by the medical profession, another mode of organizing, rather than by the market. As with appropriation and reform, this type of value infusion has also led to critique, primarily for being technocratic. Interestingly, this critique comes from both right and left as illustrated by the following quotes: “Technocracy is the pseudo-scientific side of central planning”; and “increasingly, economic policy is put in the

hands of free-market technocrats.” Within the health-care sector, this critique often comes in the form of fears about turning health-economists into the high priests of health care.

### Differential “soil” for values

Given that we have identified different ways in which new values can be introduced in markets, we may consider how current market practices affect the possibility of employing a particular such way. Can the current performance of a market affect the possibility of introducing a new value through appropriation, reform and representation? As an illustration, we draw on the recent study by Reijonen (2008) on the efforts to promote environmentally friendly (PVC-free) urine bags. The study shows how various efforts were made to introduce environmental friendliness as an important characteristic of urine bags in Denmark. These efforts included versions of all three ways of introducing new values discussed above.

The appropriation of environmental friendliness as an important issue in the qualification of urine bags proved unsuccessful. It was very difficult to have users (both patients and health care staff) pay any particular attention to the environmental friendliness of the urine bags. Other issues were considered to be of much greater importance to them, such as ease of use, comfort, container size, etc.

The efforts made to represent PVC urine bags as having detrimental effects on the natural environment were successful in the sense that such representations were indeed generated. However, the overflows from the sales and purchases of PVC urine bags were modest in relation to the total use of PVC in Denmark. Hence, it was difficult to argue that PVC urine bags constituted a particularly serious problem.

The only efforts that seemed to have any effect were those aiming at reform. It was suggested that environmental friendliness was an important norm for the procurement of medical devices. This general value, environmental friendliness, was then translated into an inclusion of PVC-freeness as a quality when evaluating different alternative products in public procurement processes. Thus, the way in which goods were qualified for exchange was modified to include environmental friendliness, with subsequent positive effects on the buying and selling of PVC-free urine bags.

Reijonens study indicates that current market practices may indeed be differentially fertile to the introduction of new values. Further empirical studies of the particular circumstances under which new values may be introduced through appropriation, representation or reform are needed in order for a more thorough understanding of the politics of performativity. A particularly interesting issue with respect to the notion of ontological politics is the possible interferences and mutual reinforcements between practices that may be observed in such processes.

### ***Discussion: When do issues become political?***

What can we say about political marketing based on our discussion about the introduction of values into markets? First of all, it is necessary to emphasize the centrality of representations in all three types of value introducing processes. Above, we downplayed this facet to make the distinction between the three clearer. However, the import of representations is striking in all three cases. Apart from the obvious role of representations in the technical and scientific controversies found in efforts to represent new or other values, we find that representations are central also to the other two. In processes of appropriation, the list of important issues involving representations includes: How can value X become (durably) associated with this particular (category of) good(s)? What images are conducive to strengthening this link? In processes of reform, the issues include: Why is Y an important value to achieve in this market? What does Y represent? Who represents Y? These questions also illustrate the dual meaning carried by the term representation.

One aspect that we would like to highlight is the issue of what the performance of a particular new value requires from others. We believe that this has considerable import on the way in which values may be introduced. Here it can be useful to distinguish between two dimensions in the responses of others. On the one hand, what others are required to do, in a very direct and literal sense. Are others, such as buyers and sellers, required to act differently in order for the market to perform the new value? We refer to this dimension as *compliance* (confer, Helgesson and Kjellberg, 2005). On the other hand, does the new value require these others to

think of the market and their own market behaviour in a different way? We refer to this dimension as *alignment*.

Very tentatively, we would argue that in order for an issue to become political, the second aspect is crucial. It is not enough to affect the primary process of interaction. In this sense there is no politics of practice. In order for an issue to become political, there is a need for a reflexive loop to connect exchange behaviour to the norms and values that are to be realized. Here we may paraphrase Hannah Arendt (1958) and say: Reflexivity is what makes market actors political.

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