

## **Exploring the Relationship between Agri-Food Marketing and Public Policy: The Case of Social Food Marketing**

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### **Summary**

In this discussion paper we consider the evolving relationship between agri-food marketing and public policy in the UK with specific reference to social food marketing. Three phases of transition are identified: agricultural marketing integration with agricultural policy; agri-food marketing integration with commercial marketing and the growth of sub-disciplines within agri-food marketing. The first two phases are detailed from an historical perspective, whilst the third phase is the subject of speculation. Central to our approach is an analysis of how the food consumer has been assembled by the discipline of agri-food marketing during these phases. Taking cues from work by Miller and Rose (1997) on the rise of consumer sciences, we draw attention to the ways that agri-food marketing has sought to 'mobilise the food consumer' and consider what this might reveal about the trajectory of the agri-food system. Specifically, we draw upon the example of social food marketing in considering the future relationship between agri-food marketing and public policy.

## **Introduction**

The relationship between agri-food marketing and public policy has been characterised by periods of integration and disintegration. Initially agricultural marketing was strongly integrated with agricultural policy. The subsequent combination of agricultural marketing with commercial marketing has resulted in an explosion of sub-disciplines, including agri-food supply chain management and social food marketing. In this paper we speculate on the implications of developing policy-orientated sub-disciplines within agri-food marketing by focusing upon the case of social food marketing as a tool of public policy.

## **From Agricultural Marketing to Agri-Food Marketing**

As a discipline, agri-food marketing emerged from the confluence of two previously distinct disciplines: agricultural marketing and mainstream marketing. Early agricultural marketing in the UK was rooted in attempts to address inefficiencies in the distribution of agricultural products arising from the structure of agricultural production prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s. The primary concern was with the functioning of agricultural commodity markets and government interventions to control the market, and was considered to be a branch of agricultural economics (Ritson, 1997b). The development of agricultural marketing occurred in connection with the setting up of agricultural marketing boards: the two activities were interrelated. Marketing boards were constructed as a result of applied scientific endeavours to improve the operation of the agrarian economy and to provide a mechanism for farmers to resist market concentration, particularly in the milk sector. Marketing boards were formed to control not only the price that producers would receive, but also to restrict supply and thus determine the price consumers would pay for the commodities covered. In this sense the food consumer remained undifferentiated and agricultural marketing was a discipline firmly located in the sphere of food production. Throughout much of this period (and for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), UK farming involved many small firms each producing what were considered to be standard commodities such as milk, wheat or potatoes. The preoccupation of applied social scientists interested in improving the functioning of the agrarian economy was not merely with boosting production, but also in improving the distribution of agricultural products. Agricultural economists in the UK were dealing with production economics and farm management, but for the agricultural marketer the distribution problems associated with agricultural production were of primary concern. Ritson (1997a, 1997b) has suggested that the focus of agricultural marketing upon distribution problems is very similar to the concerns of agricultural policy. He suggests that in this respect agricultural policy and agricultural marketing are similar. He draws attention to the three specific problems which agricultural marketing was developed to deal with: market power (and excess profit), derived from monopolies in food manufacture and retailing, excessive margins produced by inefficient market organisation, and the problem of price signals being inaccurately communicated between producers and consumers.

Agricultural marketing could offer analysis of market conduct and performance (to produce effective competition), marketing margins and market price to address these problems. From such analysis, policy recommendations could be made such as marketing boards, grading and standards infrastructure, price controls and quantity controls. These policy instruments highlight the close alignment of agricultural marketing and policy.

This confluence of interest between agricultural marketing and agricultural policy gave rise to policy interventions seeking to improve the organisation of commodity distribution. In the UK the Agricultural Marketing Acts of 1931 and 1933 sought to organise small producers of particular commodities into elected boards, which would administer marketing schemes. This move towards co-operative commodity marketing was dubbed by Wadleigh (1932) as the social control of agricultural marketing. Throughout the rest of the 1930s agricultural marketers also became interested with distributional issues further away from the farmgate and closer towards the kitchen table. In 1934 the Market Supply Committee (MSC) was set-up to assess Britain's food security situation and to advise the Minister of Agriculture in matters of food supply control (Cohen, 1934). The MSC had a particular focus on delivering (determined by market supply) the food *required* to feed the nation. In order to place demands upon food producers it was necessary to ascertain the nation's food requirements<sup>1</sup>, with the Advisory Committee on Nutrition<sup>2</sup> (ACN) established in 1935 to undertake this work (Baines, 1991). The ACN aimed to establish whether sufficient food was present in the country to provide a healthy diet, and whether nutritional intake varied between different sections of the population.

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 led to significant changes in UK society and the production, distribution and consumption of food was brought into the planned war economy. Two separate government departments were formed to deal with food and agriculture separately: the Ministry of Food and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF). According to Foreman (1989) the activities of the Ministry of Food and MAF were frequently in conflict. The former sought to represent consumers and food distributors, whilst the latter concerned itself with the agricultural sector. In order for the government to control the agri-food system during wartime, new tools were required to make the food consumption habits of the population visible. Tools such as social surveys focused upon population food consumption and led to the founding of the National Food Survey (NFS). Many surveys followed, including those examining eating patterns, attitudes to eating in canteens and how food was prepared and cooked by housewives, with this information being used in the calculation of the nutritional uptake of populations. The data generated by these surveys produced, for the first time, the differentiated food consumer, though the interest remained primarily upon those who were considered to be at risk from a poor diet.

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1 Note this is not the food that consumers think they require and so demand, but is instead the food the government have calculated consumers require in order to meet certain nutritional targets.

2 Interestingly, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) was formed in 2000 as an independent advisory committee supported by joint secretariat from the Food Standards Agency and Department of Health.

The work leading to the establishment of the National Food Survey broke a new and important path in the future development of agri-food marketing. The pre-occupation with matters on the farm had been shaken and the notion of the food consumer was taking shape. The post-war decades brought significant change in the government of food. The National Food Survey continued, but the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Ministry of Food were to merge in 1954. In their five-phase analysis of food consumption over the first 50 years of the NFS, Ritson and Hutchins (1991) describe 1950-60 as a 'return to normal diets' and 1960-70 as the 'effect of income growth'. From the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s the food control measures of the planned war economy gave way to a more open market for food. The motives of the food consumer, who had been identified through the survey work of the war period, took on a more significant role.<sup>3</sup> Thus, from the 1950s through to the early 1970s consumer scientists and market researchers, with a background in the emerging discipline of marketing, began to investigate what attributes of food and its marketing encouraged consumer acceptability. The background of some of these researchers was not in the agricultural policy domain of the agricultural marketer, instead, researchers in the new fields of advertising and marketing were beginning to pay close attention to the motives, desires and aspirations of consumers. Their importance in the agri-food sector rose in conjunction with rapid technological changes. Writing in the early 1960s, John Abbott, former Chief of the Marketing Branch of the FAO, noted that the development of self-service retailing, pre-packaged foods, canning and freezing technologies had profoundly altered the marketing structure for food and that this would have significant implications for agricultural marketing (Abbott, 1963). He also suggested that the depersonalisation of food provisioning would increase the importance of advertising.

### **The Agri-Food System and Marketing: Assembling the Consumer**

The rise of product advertising and product development in the post-war decades marked the beginning of the consumer as an active agent in the production process. Marketing as a general specialism was on the rise and attention began to be paid to the construction and delivery of marketing communications incorporating consumer demands. Historically agricultural marketing had developed upon an entirely separate path to marketing, with the former being orientated towards policy interventions in the agricultural sector and the latter emerging as a commercial activity with generic applications. The technical instruments of agricultural marketing, such as marketing boards, differed in their policy-orientation in comparison to the consumer profiling techniques of commercial marketing. However, as Abbott (1963) notes above, changes in the market structure for food were having profound impacts upon society. This, coupled with the growth in marketing as a distinct activity, meant that agricultural marketing would begin to absorb new influences. The focus of agricultural marketing upon distribution economics meant that the

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst consumer preferences were becoming more significant, price and rising incomes were the determining factors in food consumption patterns during this period.

discipline was receptive to these changes. In particular understanding the food consumer, as a relatively novel subject had significant implications for the direction of agricultural marketing.

In the post-war decades great effort was expended by marketers to become more acquainted with the often complex, subjective desires of consumers. These activities were not necessarily attempts at covert manipulation of consumers, but instead involved specific work on the part of marketers to mobilise the consumer as a subject of consumption. Miller and Rose (1997) suggest that without bringing into existence the psychology of consumers, marketers could not have contributed to the development of products for consumption. They focus upon the marketing activities undertaken at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and detail the complex social, cultural and psychological factors that these social scientists sought to make 'real' through "...assembling the subject of consumption" (Miller and Rose, 1997, p.1). Asking a group of people to engage in a very general discussion about ice-cream could result in the connection of technological problems, household meal systems and the psychological implications of food for pleasure. Thus, 'consumer behaviour' became viewed in terms of the relationship between individuals' external and internal realities. Subsequently, increasing emphasis was on demographic segmentation of the individual, specifically, but not exclusively, in relation to age, gender, socio-economic and psychological classifications. Such segmentation, albeit highly evolved, is still widely used today, particularly in the social sciences where deep understandings of the consumer are sought, for a variety of purposes (such as market research, psychographic profiling, and social marketing). Hence, this period saw rapid development in how marketers, academics, corporations "assembled" or profiled their consumers. The marketing activity undertaken at Tavistock, according to Miller and Rose (1997), was informed by a social psychology of the rational consumer. Rather than seeking to manipulate, persuade or dupe consumers, psychological and behavioural analysis was undertaken to understand the motives and desires of consumers. The emphasis of their account is not upon demonstrating that advertising and marketing played a malign or emancipatory role, but rather to understand the techniques employed and the ways in which the consumer was enacted through a mutual process.

Miller and Rose (1997) suggest that the work undertaken at Tavistock came from a realisation that although consumers were rational, their rationality was not always obvious and so seemed unpredictable when viewed from conventional economic approaches to marketing. According to Wiebe (1952) consumer rationality is said to exist in the context of humans [consumers] purchasing/consuming products or services on a rational basis. Miller and Rose (1997) widen this view in acknowledging the differentiated constitution of rational behaviour<sup>4</sup>. Only by using methods to establish these consumer perceptions and attitudes could marketers begin to understand why consumers behaved in the ways they did. In short, consumers were not treated as ignorant and impassive citizens.

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<sup>4</sup> Behaviour which is often viewed by some consumers as rational includes, for example, the excessive consumption of food high in fat and sugar.

Where does this account leave our transition from agricultural marketing and policy to agri-food marketing integration with commercial marketing? From the 1950s -1970s, marketing grew as an activity and as an academic discipline. The rise of consumer sciences had a profound effect upon the trajectory of marketing at the same time that the agri-food system began to become more orientated to consumer demands. That said, production imperatives still dominated, but the growing acceptance of the need to know, or to assemble, the food consumer was increasingly recognised by agri-food businesses. In more recent decades major socio-technical<sup>5</sup> changes have produced a very different agri-food system from that which existed in the post-war decades of the 1950's and 60's. As a result of concentrated private ownership, globally integrated supply chains and trade liberalisation imperatives, policy tools used to intervene in the agri-food system are also different (of course it can be argued that such structural features of the agri-food system are the outcome of political choices). The discipline of agri-food marketing has been responsive to these changes in the structure of the sector, for instance agri-food supply-chain management is now a highly significant sub-discipline (see, for example, Bourlakis and Weightman, 2004).

Thus, agri-food marketing has been defined as:

*"buying and selling; the economic incentive structure; and the goods handling system for food, from the point of production through processing and distribution to the final sales to consumers..."*

(Padberg, 1997, p.1)

This definition of agri-food marketing highlights the difficult socio-technical problems produced by a globalised agri-food system. Agri-food marketing deals with market structure, logistics, retailing, food safety and quality markers. Two important and related points made in the definition by Padberg (1997) are the consolidation of firms within the agri-food system and the growth in trade of manufactured food products vis-à-vis bulk food commodities. The rise in complex food products relative to simple food commodities is a significant factor in the development of the agri-food marketing discipline, with the connection of agricultural marketing to policy being unsettled by these developments. In terms of policy tools, much less emphasis is now placed upon direct market controls over the UK agricultural sector<sup>6</sup>. Instead consumer demands, in part channelled through the dominant multinational retailers, are impacting upon the direction of the agri-food system. In the UK a significant reappraisal of food policy was prompted by the 2002 Report of the Commission on the Future of Food and Farming (often referred to as the Curry Commission). The report took 'reconnection' between food consumers and producers as a central theme, suggesting that consumers ought to be reconnected to what they eat and how it is produced.

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<sup>5</sup> The use of the term socio-technical implies that the social and the technological are always related; neither do technologies determine societies nor do societies determine technologies.

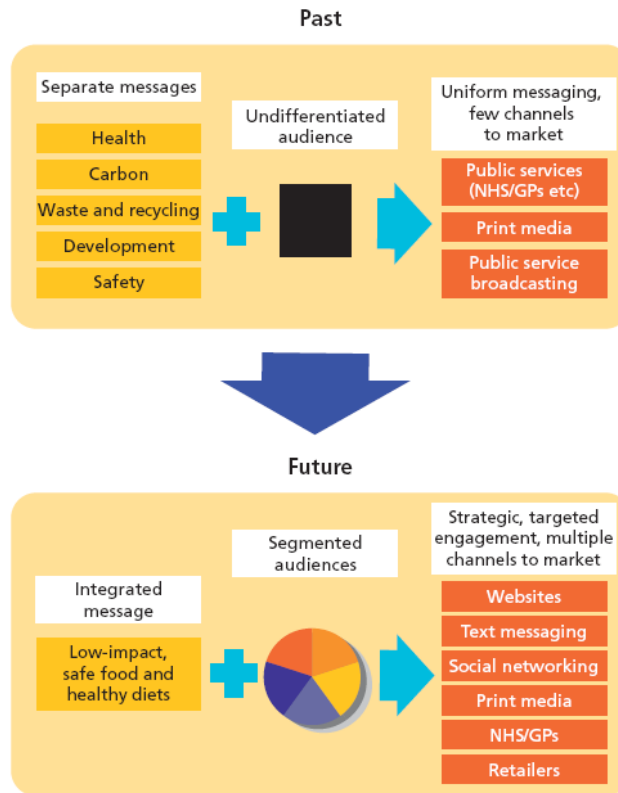
<sup>6</sup> Multi-level regulatory pressures have become more prominent, in particular on food safety, animal health and disease and environmental goods.

This new orientation of agri-food system control has been termed the 'reversed food chain', whereby demand signals guide the development of agri-food products and technologies (Wolf and Nilsagard, 2002). This orientation provokes new questioning of the appropriate and relevant policy tools for intervention.

### **Agri-Food Marketing and Public Policy: The Case of Social Food Marketing**

It has been argued in this paper that agri-food marketing emerged from the confluence of agricultural marketing and commercial marketing. These two disciplines had very different origins and policy-orientations. Miller and Rose (1997) suggest that some forms of commercial marketing had a distinct social psychological emphasis, challenging descriptions of commercial marketing as a form of malign and coercive control. The emergent discipline of agri-food marketing integrated both elements of agricultural marketing and commercial marketing, with further changes in the structure of the agri-food system contributing to the development of new sub-disciplines within agri-food marketing. In the remainder of the paper, the substance of one of these sub-disciplines, social food marketing, is discussed. In particular, the relationship between agri-food marketing and public policy is explored.

Recent policy developments in the UK have explicitly considered the role of social marketing in food policy. The UK Government's Strategy Unit review of food policy, "Food Matters", suggests that social marketing has an important role to play in promoting and modifying the agri-food system through an emphasis upon behaviour change in food consumption, prompted by rising levels of obesity (Strategy Unit, 2008). Social marketing is described as a sophisticated approach to public policy which deals directly with social, psychological and cultural factors. The concern of Government to produce more targeted and differentiated public policy interventions in the area of food policy is demonstrated by this figure, taken from the same review:



(Strategy Unit, 2008, p.55)

The emergence of social marketing can be traced back to a key article by the marketing scholars Kotler and Zaltman (1971). Social marketing was, for the first time, explicitly defined as: "the design, implementation, and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas" (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971, p. 5). More recently, social marketing in the UK has found an institutional home in the National Social Marketing Centre (NSMC). The NSMC suggest that social marketing is founded on three core principles and three core concepts (NSMC, 2007). The three core principles are behavioural goals, the marketing mix and audience segmentation. The three core concepts are insight, exchange and competition. The consumer is the focus of social marketing, not only in regards to consumer-behaviour change, but with respect to researchers, policy makers and others who seek to assemble a 'profile' of the target consumer. The relationship of these variables and the consumer is diagrammatically represented below:



(NSMC, 2007, p.37)



Behaviour and behavioural goals refer to set, measurable and explicit goals in relation to consumer behaviour change. The marketing mix infers an approach whereby a mixture of marketing methods are used to assist with a given behaviour change, in order to most effectively achieve specific behavioural goals. The third principle of audience segmentation is more closely aligned to the techniques used to assemble the subject of consumption. Here the target consumers are segmented/differentiated using traditional segmentation techniques, such as demographic variables, and through more novel techniques such as psychographic segmentation, for which the emphasis is on consumer attitudes, feelings and emotions.

According to the NSMC (2007), the three principles of social marketing are then augmented by three concepts. The concept of insight refers to the information ultimately generated once the target consumer has been carefully 'studied' and 'profiled'. The suggestion here is that it is not enough for the social marketer to simply guess or assume what the target consumer thinks, feels or does. Instead they should base their social marketing work on solid research of the consumer, avoiding the imposition of their values and attitudes in the process. The concept of competition refers to the identification of any competitive factors to the desired behavioural change. Thus from the perception of the consumer, internal barriers may be influential, such as motivation or even addiction, in addition to external barriers, such as economic and time pressures. By gaining a full understanding of all of these factors it is suggested that social marketers, and indeed consumers, will be better placed to understand the influences and obstructions to behaviour change. The concept of exchange recognises that the consumer will most likely want a positive return for their altered behaviours. Recognising what is deemed a worthy benefit from the point of the consumer is advantageous to successful and sustained behaviour change. There is no purpose in offering a benefit which is unlikely to be deemed of benefit from the perception of the consumer.

Social marketing has, however, been subject to critique by marketers and other social scientists. An early appraisal by Bloom and Novelli (1981) highlighted problems in analysing the consumer with restricted access to secondary data. Currently, this is less of a problem given the myriad of market research companies specifically profiling and storing data on consumers. However, the profiling of consumers in a timely fashion, based on their transactional purchases, is a source of contention. A second and current problem raised by Bloom and Novelli (1981) is that of gaining accurate data. They argue that obtaining valid, truthful and thus reliable consumer information is problematic, given the often personal and sometimes intrusive nature of questioning for social marketing related issues. Despite these concerns, the NSMC and other social marketing organisations are increasingly leading the way, in terms of profiling and understanding consumers in order to tackle demanding social issues. Indeed the NSMC now illustrate 'best practice' case studies highlighting how consumers are profiled in order to enact social changes. Grier and Bryant (2005, p.329) do suggest though that the social marketing framework faces major challenges, based on arguments from Andreasen (2003). These include challenges in four key areas: "mis-

conceptions and other barriers to diffusion; formative research and evaluation methodologies; theoretical issues and ethical considerations". The first of these, barriers to diffusion, concerns the argument that social marketing is more often than not only viewed as social communication, or advertising. Criticism such as this argues that this can foster confusion for consumers and policy officials, as well as the inappropriate use and utilisation of social marketing.

Whilst the general social marketing approach can be criticised, it does offer solutions to outstanding criticisms of *traditional* policy management tools. For instance, Rothschild (1999, p.24) argues that there is an over-emphasis on public management tools such as education and the use of the law, with limited attention paid to "*marketing and exchange*" in relation to public health and social issues. One contributory factor of social marketing is that it can both acknowledge and *build* upon stand-alone concepts, such as education, utilising elements of support, design and control. Even though social marketing does utilise principles of education and law, with education (through social marketing) seeking to inform and make individuals aware of the choices they make, and more legislative and controlling measures impacting on individual choice and voluntary actions, it can be much more than this. In this sense the elements of design and support can act as supporting constructs. Design offers the capability to design 'out', or design 'in' particular measures. This could include addressing limited urban 'green space' for physical exercise, in planning more parkland or other such 'green' facilities for example. In addition, support acknowledges the often long term nature of policy interventions and the impact on individuals, who may need added guidance and encouragement throughout their period of behaviour change and which education may fail to address. Here social marketing clearly acknowledges, and offers, solutions to critiques which pinpoint the over- and inefficient- use of existing policy management tools such as education, offering itself as an additional policy tool solution.

Though social marketing has its limits, it is increasingly advocated and utilised within government policy. Just as agricultural marketing became closely aligned to agricultural policy, so social marketing has become aligned with agri-food policy (e.g. Strategy Office, 2008) producing a social food marketing sub-discipline. One primary concern of social food marketing in this sense is to address the issue of food choice and rising levels of obesity in many countries. However, this focus is also not without criticism. Lang and Rayner (2007, p.169) assert that, "Social marketing, which has its core precepts in faulty individual behaviours and beliefs, contains the rhetorically uncomplicated appeal to consumers to make 'healthy choices' in the marketplace." The characterisation that engaging people using a social food marketing approach makes an 'uncomplicated appeal' to make particular choices is a serious one. It must be remembered that social marketing is one amongst many policy tools, as Lang and Rayner (2007) recognise. Using a social food marketing approach does not mean that beliefs are regarded as misguided and failures are personal ones, though equally it does not explicitly deal with structural issues in the agri-food system or with legislative and regulatory measures, strictly defined. The core point of

contention over the social food marketing approach seems to lie in the aim of behaviour (cultural) change and the methods used to achieve this. Although the regulatory tools offered by social food marketing are focused upon people as consumers, this does not mean the activity of social food marketing ignores wider issues. Debate within social food marketing is not restricted to the choice of one food product over another.

The principles, critiques and strengths of social food marketing, as sub-discipline of agri-food marketing, delineate a possible mechanism for reconnection with food policy concerns. In particular, the principle of consumer segmentation is viewed as core in the development of differentiated public policy in the agri-food sector (Strategy Unit, 2008). The differentiated approach to food policy is underpinned by an attention to psychology:

*“Engaging consumers using social marketing techniques can promote new or adaptive forms of behaviour. Successful social marketing campaigns, such as those on smoking cessation and drink driving, are based on a sophisticated understanding of the psychology that drives behaviours. This is particularly relevant to food because of the complex interaction between social, cultural and economic factors in making food choices.”*

(Strategy Unit, 2008, p. 62)

The recognition of ‘social, cultural and economic factors’ suggests that the approach to psychology used in social food marketing should be a *social* psychological one. As Eiser (1986) has emphasised, a social psychological approach should not begin from the premise that behaviour is irrational, or ‘wrong’, but instead should consider the influence of social context upon behaviour. Through social food marketing, the food consumer, as the subject of food consumption, can be ‘assembled’ not only to provide information on their desires and demands towards food products, but to also use this information to influence their end decisions and behaviours, whilst understanding the social contexts of individuals.

Social food marketing is one approach within agri-food policy and is by no means an approach devoid of problems. The potential problems arise, in part, from the specifics of the agri-food system. Lee *et al.* (2007) suggest that, given the complexity of the agri-food system, specifying problem boundaries is not straightforward. As a result, problems in the agri-food system are open to different framings. Social food marketing provides one framing amongst others. Social food marketing can be used to *investigate* consumer behaviour, but can also help to *influence* behaviour, with these behavioural changes extending beyond the mere purchase and consumption of food items. In this respect social food marketing can contribute to a multi-level and differentiated approach to connecting agri-food marketing and public policy.

## Conclusion

We began this paper by suggesting that agri-food marketing had undergone two phases of transition; agricultural marketing integration with agricultural policy and agri-food marketing integration with commercial marketing. We speculated on the possibility that a third transition is ongoing, which involves the fracture of agri-food marketing into many sub-disciplines, such as food supply chain management and consumer-led product development. In this current period of disciplinary innovation, we suggest that the reengagement of agri-food marketing with public policy is also underway. The example of social marketing demonstrates one approach to the application of agri-food marketing to public policy. Whilst social marketing can be criticised as focusing upon behaviour change rather than broader and more coercive policy interventions, it reintegrates agri-food marketing with policy concerns and involves rethinking the aims of marketing and the operation of public policy. By integrating these approaches the worlds of consumption and the worlds of soft regulation are brought together. Insights from Miller and Rose (1997) help to understand the complexities of people as subjects of consumption. Thus consumption is not simply understood as an unthinking individual choice between similar products, but instead can invoke considerations of technological development, household economics and cultural identity. By engaging with the 'rational irrationalities' of people as consumers, social marketing may offer a new approach to reengaging agri-food marketing with public policy.

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