

Market cooperation – a cornerstone of commercial food provisioning

Since obtaining my doctorate, I have studied and taught market organisation in agrifood industries, foremost how market actors co-organise and co-create values, valuation practices, and exchange. Drawing on these endeavours, my docent lecture will communicate three fundamental insights: (1) the importance of understanding the cooperative dimensions of markets, (2) how critical analysis of wide-spread economic ideas may guide scientific inquiry, and (3) how scholars of all stripes may – and should – foster intellectual curiosity, and the important role of books thereto.

The starting point for my lecture is the role of markets in the current agri-food system. *Markets*, conventionally defined, are relational formations that coordinate and enact economic exchange (of money and priced goods and services) under competition among buyers and sellers. As such, markets are a cornerstone of the current food systems' organisation. Agrifood supply chains – local as well as global – rely substantially on markets to feed people by the continuous exchange of food and money. However, market exchange is usually distinguished (from exchange in general) by its reliance on – and promotion of – *competition*. It is in this characteristic that some see great promises of efficiency and societal development in markets – because businesses must innovate to survive under competition. Others, in contrast, see market competition as a threat, destroying social, moral, aesthetic, and environmental values often hard-to-impossible to account for in financial terms while aggravating injustices. Nevertheless, proponents and critics alike tend to agree that competition is the fundamental characteristic of market exchange.

Contrasting the previous outline, my docent lecture is titled *Market cooperation*. While competition is certainly a key characteristic of market exchange, the over-all argument of my lecture is that competition requires cooperation; among market actors and between markets and the society that embeds and permeates them. It is by cooperating that market actors can set relevant prices, standards, and rules, and moreover share knowledge and foster social relations. In short, cooperation coordinates market actors so that they may compete in a deliberate and systematic manner, and not simply lash out in random economic aggressions. Furthermore, to battle the pressing issues of unsustainability in the current food system requires a closer look at the cooperative aspects of markets; how can markets be (re)organised to battle various pressing issues that are often associated with the current organisation of market competition in the food system? My inquiries into market cooperation have fostered the following three insights:

The first insight concerns the importance of understanding market cooperation. Agrifood products usually relies on commercialisation to feed people. A competitive product, however, relies on that the market actors cooperate – to organise competition and to establish what qualities that are supposed to be competitive. My research exemplifies how such cooperation is established – and how its absence obstructs actors' participation in markets (Bååth, 2022a; 2024; Bååth and Nilsson, 2024).

The second insight regards how critical analysis of widespread economic ideas may guide scientific inquiry. During my doctoral project on over-supply in the Swedish meat industry, serendipitous findings made me question some widespread economic ideas. Foremost, the role of competition in market organisation and that price formation would stem from a combination of production costs and profit margin. My research exemplifies how the questioning of such ideas allows for a more realist take on markets and the merits of questioning the most everyday assumptions about markets to identify meaningful directions of research (Bååth, 2023; 2022a; Bååth and Fuentes, 2025).

The third insight concerns the importance of fostering and maintaining intellectual curiosity by challenging rote and fragmented research (and education). By intellectual curiosity I refer to an intrinsic value of scientific research: to pursue understanding and formulate explanations of the workings of reality. While scientific research has several instrumental values, these rely on the enactment of intellectual curiosity. To enact it requires the pursuit of research in a manner that interconnects facts, or findings, of different kinds and from different vantage points. Thus, to formulate explanations allowing for a substantial degree of complexity – because reality is complex. In the years since obtaining my doctorate, I have foremost authored scientific articles. However, in parallel, I have also published several academic book reviews and used books as research materials (Bååth, 2022b; Bååth and Neuman 2023). One of my most fundamental insights from the last years is that the article format tends to hinder intellectual curiosity because it demands a reduction of complexity and detail – both of arguments and research materials. Consequently, the article format limits the formulation of broader explanations that do reality justice. Thus, my ambition for the future is to read (more) and hopefully also author scholarly books – taking aim at everyday assumptions about consumer demand and market regulation in agri-food supply.