



For whom? – The governance of organic food and farming in the UK

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 3 March 2009

Keywords:
Social movements
Organic movement
Retailers
Certification

ABSTRACT

The challenge of organic agriculture – that it might provide new forms of participation around food – has been hard to encapsulate in the conventional circuits of democracy. One answer to this ‘offer’ has been for consumers to purchase organic items as a way of demonstrating support for the organic sector. This paper argues that although this strategy may have been successful in the past, there is increasing evidence that there is a convergence between sections of the organic movement and the dominant multiple retailers. Through a wide range of evidence, including an analysis of how organic products are promoted and of how organic farm businesses are configured, this paper suggests that the potential of the organic movement is increasingly being circumscribed.

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Currently within the supply chain, retailers hold power. State involvement, meanwhile, is fragmenting between different levels of governance: local, national, regional and international. Within civil society, there are tensions over who speaks for civil society: ‘ordinary’ consumers through polls (but who asks the questions?) or the weekly shopping purchase (the ‘consumer votes’ theory) or ‘champions’ and partisan activists such as civil society non-government organisations. (Lang, 2005, p. 730)

In a democratic polity the governance of organic farming and food has presented a number of challenges, not least in the public debate around the introduction of genetically modified crops. Underlying these controversies broader problems of democratic representation are being played out. Questions of organic farming and food rarely feature in elections, leaving politicians without a specific mandate. The organic movement has a social constituency it is seeking to represent within the policy process, whilst increasingly policy issues surrounding food in the UK are being decided by private interests principally those of the supermarkets (Marsden et al., 1999). People are invited to participate in organic food through their purchasing decisions – the democracy of shopping, but this can be a highly differentiated experience. At one end of the spectrum it may be as consumers in a supermarket buying analogues of common products, at the other through a subscription to a box of meat or vegetables which are specified by the farmer. Although these are both organic options, implicit within them are different approaches to the social role of food. As Lang suggests this poses questions about whether any progress is being made towards ‘food democracy’ or whether the present governance of the

organic food system in the UK is just another branch of ‘food control’ (Lang, 2005).

This paper argues that there is a divergence appearing in the British organic movement, which whilst at present it is not formalized can be discerned. The divergence revolves around the central strategy of the movement as it has developed over the last twenty-five years. In promoting the organic movement a dual track approach has been implemented, with key organizations such as the Soil Association, campaigning for organic food over a wide range of topics: GM foods, school dinners, rural development, sustainability, farm conservation. At the same time organic producers and retailers have marketed their products in largely conventional terms but often with reference to these wider campaigns. People have been addressed in two registers simultaneously – citizens and consumers. Since the early 1980s the British organic movement has sought to increase its influence through this combination of campaigning and marketing (Clunies-Ross, 1990). This strategy assumes that both strands can be kept separate and that they are mutually beneficial. One element of the movement is increasingly referring to people solely as consumers, whilst others are trying to engage with them on a wider agenda.

It appears that in the promotion of organic food a linguistic and argumentative convergence is taking place, with those purchasing being positioned and viewed as consumers by both retailers and campaigning groups. Organic is promoted much as any other ‘brand’ might be, with organic being constructed as a phenomenon to which consumers will respond through the provision of various ‘triggers’ and advantage can be gained through accurate marketing. In contrast, within the promotion of organic food and farming, one group, the major box-schemes, stand out against this tendency by trying to discuss with their subscribers a wider range of topics and to educate them about organic farming. This suggests that the

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radical challenge of organic agriculture may be eclipsed if 'organic' becomes a pillar brand of the dominant supermarkets.

In an echo of this divergence within the organic movement there is evidence of a similar difference within those who farm and grow organically. These farmers can be broken into two distinct groups, those integrated with the national supply chains and those who are retailing their own products. The former are in many ways hard to distinguish from their non-organic peers, apart from their farming system and are not necessarily achieving the wider social aspirations of the movement. This group would appear to constitute two-thirds of those presently certified as organic. The remaining third engaged in the production and retailing of organic goods appear to be realizing those wider benefits the organic movement has often claimed for itself – rural development, energy conservation and a focus on the importance of food to well-being (Balfour, 1943; Lampkin, 1990; Holden, 1999).

Further complicating this picture, evidence would suggest that the public aspire to these wider goals, that many people are mistrustful of the supermarkets that dominate their food options and see organic as an alternative. Whenever organic is seen as being close to the experience of the supermarkets, it too becomes distrusted. There is also evidence to suggest that the public view organic farming as being more radical than at presently it is constituted. It would be too simplistic to assume that this divergence within the movement represents explicitly ideological divisions rather it foregrounds questions of strategy.

In order to explore these themes this paper first considers the theory of governance and social movements as they relate to the British organic movement. It then analyses how this relates to the certification of organic production in the UK, and how this is shaped. This leads into evidence of who eats organic food and new data from a project investigating how organic food and farming is promoted, which identifies evidence of a strategic convergence. The next discussion in the paper addresses the question of who produces organic food in the UK, where evidence is presented of how a divergence is taking place within those who farm and grow organic food. The paper ends with a discussion of this evidence and draws on the wider academic literature to consider the future of the British organic movement.

Governance

When I speak of power relations, of the forms of rationality which can rule and regulate them, I am not referring to Power – with a capital P – dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body... They are multiple: they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution or an administration... It is a field of analysis and not at all a reference to any unique instance. (Foucault, 1998, pp. 451)

Debates about governance draw our attention towards mechanisms of control, co-ordination and allocation through which various forms of power operate (Bevir, 1999). Power is understood as not being something that is possessed by individual actors but is derived from a set of discursive relations. As such power is de-centred not being found in a particular locale but in the interstitial spaces in the network, where the discursive formations underpinning the networks operate (Murdoch, 2000). It is not possible to disassociate power from discourse or knowledge, requiring that analytically the means of communication need to be considered (Cook, 2004).

In the British context this means that over the past thirty years there has been a transition from government by a hierarchical administration, via the insertion of market-type systems through

to an emphasis on networks. The study of the formation of agricultural policy has been one of the clearest examples of this process in action (Marsh and Smith, 2000). Rather than all of the actors in forming policy towards agriculture being gathered around one ministry, agricultural policy has become the interest of those concerned with environmental protection, wildlife conservation, public health, competition policy and animal welfare, to name but a few of those involved. These actors vary in form – private companies, state agencies, NGOs – and level at which they operate – local, national, supra-national. Policy networks are often contrasted with issue networks, which are more likely to gravitate around conflict, temporariness and monologue. Whilst in some areas the organic movement has been involved in an issue network, such as in GM crops, in others it has become an established part of the policy networks of agriculture (Reed, 2006). Increasingly these policy networks have become further differentiated as the process of devolution develops, with an increasingly plurality of policies towards organic farming and food.

Policy regarding organic farming was explicitly constituted as operating initially through a market mechanism under the Conservative government (1979–97) and then through a system of networks under New Labour (1997 – present). This governance has been largely expressed through discussions of the certification of organic produce (House of Commons, 2001). Much of the governing has been mediated through a range of techniques of power/knowledge that have focused on the 'statistical image' of organic farming and food. The organic sector or industry has been known to those who govern it through numbers, inherent within these ways of knowing are certain epistemologies and assumptions. Smith and Marsden have argued that the dominance of the statistical image in the governance of organic agriculture has obscured the growing dominance of the multiple retailers (Smith and Marsden, 2004). Less critically commented on has been the tendency of market research, in creating and guiding the development and marketing of food products (Munday, 2006). Yet these techniques, with an inherent behaviourist bias, play a central role in the contemporary governance of food. These forms of knowing create subject positions which are disposed to creating consumers rather than citizens (Miller and Rose, 1995).

Movement

Social movements are amorphous phenomena, with 'membership' being fulfilled by participation and affinity, how this can be related to the organic movement remains problematic (Melucci, 1996). Formal roles are available through becoming an organic producer, or joining one of the movement's organisations, less formal routes could be through purchasing large amounts of organic goods. In each case it may be possible to do so for instrumental or self-regarding reasons, whilst those who purchase few goods may subscribe fully. This permeable border of affiliation and support is often a strength; allowing the movement to scale-up its activities, but it also means that its base of support may be ill-defined and open to appropriation.

As with the wider environmental movement, the organic movement has a number of social movement organisations that both organise and represent the movement (della Porta and Diani, 1999). The predominant organisation in the UK is the Soil Association. The Soil Association is a registered charity that seeks to promote organic farming and food, whilst providing information and support for organic farmers. It publishes the magazines 'Living Earth' and 'Organic Farming', as well as a constantly evolving but substantial website. The Soil Association charity wholly owns a limited company SA Cert, which is dedicated to the certification of organic producers and processors. Strategically the Soil Associa-

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