



Organic food and the plural moralities of food provisioning

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A B S T R A C T

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The aim of this paper is twofold. The first aim is to unfold the moral complexity of organic food consumption as part of household food provisioning. By acknowledging this complexity, and the difficulty of determining what is 'good' and 'right' in food provisioning, the idea is to allow for a better understanding of how organic food may, or may not, fit in with the various concerns of food provisioning. The second aim is to analyse how food provisioners handle this complexity so that food provisioning can proceed as an ordinary everyday activity.

The paper analyses empirical material from a study of household food provisioning in Denmark. Theoretically, it draws on French pragmatic sociology as represented by the work of Boltanski and Thévenot on moral conventions and regimes of engagement. The analysis illustrates that food provisioning involves several competing sets of moral conventions and that the status of organic food in relation to these is often uncertain and contested. However, it also identifies among provisioners different strategies for handling this moral complexity in ordinary everyday life. The paper calls for some modesty in trying to change consumer behaviour in favour of organic products. Providing consumers with more information about organic food may not make it easier to determine what is 'good' and 'right' when buying food. It may only add to the complexity of food provisioning and thus to the need for compromise and pragmatism.

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1. Introduction

With organic agriculture expanding rapidly in recent years (Willer and Kilcher, 2010), much research has been devoted to the understanding of patterns of consumer demand for organic food (see Aertsens et al., 2009; Hughner et al., 2007; Midmore et al., 2005; Torjusen et al., 2004; Yiridoe et al., 2005). This paper argues that an important part of the key to this understanding lies in the plurality of moralities at play in food consumption, suggesting that more attention should be paid to the moral complexity of everyday life food practices and to the ways in which people handle this complexity.

"Why don't people, in their consumer role, have a well developed moral conscience?" (McGregor, 2006:164) This question is raised polemically in an article by McGregor, who finds "much of 'Northern' consumer behaviour unethical and immoral", as reflected in "refusing to acknowledge that one's consumption behaviour is tantamount to exploiting, using, abusing and discarding people and elements of the ecosystem" (McGregor, 2006:164,165). While not underestimating

the contribution of consumption to social and environmental problems, this paper suggests, in opposition to McGregor, that we should also not underestimate the moral complexity of consumption. The proposition is that what is at play, at least in the case of food consumption, is not a *lack* of morality, but a *plurality* of competing moralities, understood as principles for determining what constitutes 'good' and 'bad', 'proper' and 'improper' food (Sassatelli, 2004; Wilk, 2001:253).

Studies have found that consumers do experience food practices as constituting a matter of moral concern (Douglas, 1966; Miller, 1998; Stein and Nemeroff, 1995). However, contrary to the position taken by McGregor (2006) in equating 'moral' with 'ethical' and 'green' consumption, others point to food consumption as an object of conflicts and dilemmas between different moral principles and normative demands, such as those of caring for family members, of thrift, etc., as well as of environmental concern (Miller, 1998; Wilk, 2001). Halkier points out how contemporary media abound with such normative demands:

"everyday consumption activities become normatively contested in contemporary societies, because ordinary consumers in medialised discourses are increasingly ascribed with responsibility for helping to solve a large number of societal difficulties, such as environmental and health problems" (Halkier, 2010:19)

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Organic food provides a good example of how the environmental concerns addressed by eco-labelling meet and intermingle with other normative demands in consumption. At the same time, the moral 'good' of organic food is contested and undercut by uncertainty and paradoxes. It is a matter of contest, for example, whether organic food is healthier than conventionally produced food, and whether its environmental impact is lower (Dangour et al., 2009; Foster et al., 2006; Mondelaers et al., 2009a). This means that what is 'good' and 'right' in food consumption is not an easy question, and that organic food cannot be straightforwardly equated with 'the good' and 'the right'.

Based on a Danish study of household food provisioning, this paper aims, first, to analytically *unfold the moral complexity of organic food consumption* as part of everyday food provisioning and, secondly, to *analyse how food provisioners handle this moral complexity* in everyday life. The overall objective is to contribute to the understanding of why people buy, and do not buy, organic food.

In focussing on organic food consumption as part of everyday food provisioning, the paper builds on an emerging body of sociological research that studies organic consumption in the context of everyday life complexity (e.g. Boström and Klintman, 2009; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Eden, 2009; Halkier, 2010; Ilsøe, 2006; Lamine, 2008; Lockie, 2002). The main contribution of the paper lies in emphasising the moral dimensions of this complexity. To further unfold these moral dimensions, the paper uses Boltanski and Thévenot's frameworks of conventions theory (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, 2006) and pragmatic regimes of engagement (Thévenot, 2001b, 2007). Conventions theory is based on a symmetric levelling of, and a detailed descriptive approach to, competing orders of moral evaluation (Silber, 2003:432). It thus provides an analytical tool for unfolding the moral plurality of organic consumption without privileging particular moral principles. The broader framework of pragmatic regimes of engagement provides an account of the interplay between moral evaluations and the more routinised and habitual ways of engaging with the world that dominate much of everyday life (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006:347–358), also when it comes to organic food consumption (Halkier, 2001b; Lamine, 2008). It thus helps understand how the moral complexity of organic consumption is handled in everyday food provisioning.

The following section outlines answers given in existing literature to the questions of why people buy and do not buy organic food, in order to specify how the questions are addressed in this paper by way of the everyday life perspective. This is followed by presentations of the theoretical frameworks used in the analysis and the empirical material to which they are applied. The findings are presented and discussed in two sections, following the logic of the two aims of the paper. A final section draws out the main conclusions and points to questions for further research.

2. Understanding why consumers buy organic food, and why not

Across national contexts, most studies identify health concerns as consumers' primary reasons for buying organic food (e.g. Chen, 2009; Magnusson et al., 2003; Mondelaers et al., 2009b; Sandalidou et al., 2002). Taste is identified as another main factor (e.g. Lea and Worsley, 2005; Radman, 2005; Wier et al., 2008), but concerns about the environment and animal welfare are also found important in some studies (e.g. Grankvist and Biel, 2001; Harper and Makatouni, 2002; Honkanen et al., 2006; Magistris and Gracia, 2008). Categorising health and taste as private/egoistic and, conversely, environment and animal welfare as public/altruistic concerns, a number of studies thus conclude that organic consumers are motivated primarily by private or egoistic concerns

(e.g. McEachern and McClean, 2002; Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008; Padel and Foster, 2005; Wier et al., 2008).

From a broader perspective, the rise and growth of organic consumption has been seen as a response to developments in modern society. Several studies find that organic food is perceived as safer than conventionally produced food (e.g. Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008; Rimal et al., 2005; Williams and Hammit, 2000, 2001), indicating that organic food consumption may be seen as a response to food scares (e.g. Chen, 2009; O'Donovan and McCarthy, 2002) or to risk society in general (e.g. Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Halkier, 2001a). Similarly, it is found that consumers perceive of organic food and food production as more 'natural' (e.g. O'Doherty Jensen, 2004; Onyango et al., 2007), and that the growth of the organic market may be seen as a response to the industrialisation and globalisation of conventional food systems (e.g. Lassen and Kortzen, 2009; Lockie et al., 2004; Murdoch and Miele, 1999). Stressing the political aspects of such responses, organic consumption has been seen as an opportunity for political expression or civic responsibility taking through boycotts and supportive buying (e.g. Boström and Klintman, 2008; Halkier and Holm, 2008; Jordan et al., 2004; Micheletti, 2003:119–147).

With this plurality of reasons for buying organic food in mind, it seems relevant to ask not only why people buy organic food, but also why they do not – at least not always, or not to the extent that their positive attitudes towards organic food or their awareness of food related risks would suggest. This is a question often addressed in the literature on 'green' or organic consumption as an attitude-behaviour or awareness-behaviour 'gap' (e.g. Godin et al., 2010; Hughner et al., 2007:103–104; Kennedy et al., 2009; Padel and Foster, 2005; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006).

Among the explanations found for non-consumption of organic food are factors relating to *social or market structures*, such as the availability of organic products (e.g. Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002a; Hamm and Gronefeld, 2004:57–59; Midmore et al., 2005:38; O'Doherty Jensen et al., 2008:98; O'Donovan and McCarthy, 2002) or its packaging and promotion (e.g. Hill and Lynchehaun, 2002; Latacz-Lohmann and Foster, 1997; Roddy et al., 1996; Sandalidou et al., 2002). Price, typically premium prices, is almost universally identified as a main barrier to organic consumption (e.g. Brown et al., 2009; Lea and Worsley, 2005; Magnusson et al., 2001; Wier and Smed, 2002; Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002), although it has also been found that consumers perceive of premium prices for organic products as an indicator of better quality (e.g. Cicia et al., 2002; Hill and Lynchehaun, 2002). This may point to socio-economic barriers (e.g. Denver and Christensen, 2007; O'Donovan and McCarthy, 2002:367), or to the role of social distinction (O'Doherty Jensen et al., 2008:92), although attempts to classify consumers by indicators such as income and education have been somewhat mixed (Hughner et al., 2007:96). Market segmentation studies use social factors and distinctions to categorise consumers according to their relation to organic food (e.g. Didier and Lucie, 2008; Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002b; Økologisk Landsforening, 2007; Sanjuán et al., 2003) – mainly to identify consumer segments that value or are willing to pay more for organic products (Halkier, 2010:47–48), though simultaneously identifying the less positive or willing. A Danish study, for example, distinguishes between 'the convinced', 'the indifferent' and four other consumer segments in relation to organic food, through combining social demographics with cognitive and motivational factors (O'Doherty Jensen et al., 2008:102–105).

Cognitive and motivational factors thus constitute a second group of explanations given for non-consumption of organic food. A common assumption, especially in psychological and economic

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