

The spaces and ethics of organic food

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Abstract

Initial assessments of the potential for organic food systems have offered an optimistic interpretation of the progressive political and ethical characteristics involved. This positive gloss has prompted a stream of critique emphasising the need to explore the ambiguities and disconnections inherent therein. In this paper, we consider the case of Riverford Organic Vegetables,¹ arguably the largest supplier of organic vegetables in the UK, and suggest that existing debates assume too much about the “goods” and “rights” of organic food and leave important questions about the spaces and ethics of organic food. We argue that, in the case of Riverford, the space of organic food production and distribution is neither the small, local, counter-cultural farm nor the large, transnational, corporate firm. Rather, simultaneously, the spaces of organic food production and distribution are the national network, the regional distribution system and the local farm. In addition, in the case of Riverford, the ethics of organic food exhibit few grand designs (of environmental sustainability, for example). Rather, the ethics of organic food are best characterised as: *ordinary*, since they relate to concerns about taste, value for money, care within the family and so on; *diverse*, since multiple practices steer the production and distribution of organic food; and *graspable*, in that both vegetables and box have material and symbolic presence for consumers.

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1. Introduction: the politics and ethics of “alternative” food

This paper investigates the complex and diverse ethics represented in and practiced through a scheme operated by a firm based in Devon, England—Riverford Organic Vegetables—to deliver regular boxes of organic food to consumers across a significant stretch of Southern and Middle England. Although the debates around the ethics of organic food have typically been framed around a divide between production (see, for example, Hall and Moggyorody, 2001; Kaltoft and Risgaard, 2006; Rigby and Young, 2000), and consumption (see, for example, Cunningham, 2001; Davies et al., 1995; Lockie et al., 2002, 2004; Makatouni, 2001), we attempt here to advance a somewhat

different theorisation of ethical consumption through a detailed case study of the organisation and practice of Riverford’s organic food production and distribution enterprise. Thus, this paper relates to consumption only indirectly, showing how Riverford communicates with consumers, and how consumers are provided with containers of food whose materiality is part of the message being conveyed by the supplier. This approach is, therefore, marked by both limitation and opportunity. The limitation is that we do not present empirical evidence of ideological, performative or relational aspects of the identity of ethical consumers of Riverford organic food. The opportunity is to explore an alternative point of entry into debates on the ethical consumption of organic food. Here, then, we focus our interest on the food itself—its production and distribution, its quality and significance—as understood by individuals involved with the Riverford operation, and by Riverford as constituted collectively. Our aim, therefore, is to demonstrate how Riverford constructs particular possibilities for consumption. Such an approach is hardly

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novel given the recent fashion of “following the thing” (Cook, 2004), but we argue that it does offer particular inflections on the ethics of consuming organic food, in terms of the ways in which a producer and distributor of organic food constructs ethical possibilities for its consumers, at least in part by constructing a strong sense of its own actions, and the reasons for and identity of those actions. In so doing, there arises an interesting juxtaposition of production and consumption.

Before narrating the case study of Riverford, however, it is important to place this particular form of organic food production in the wider conceptual frames of the ethicality and spatiality of organic agriculture. Initial assessments of the potential for organic food systems have offered an optimistic interpretation of the progressive political and ethical characteristics involved (see ECRA, no date, Tovey, 2002) and of the local nature of organic ethics (see Halweil, 2004; Nabham, 2002). The organic nature of food is seen to have provided an alternative to the perceived health risks of chemically induced foodstuffs, and to suggest natural, sustainable and wholesome eating. Moreover, the supposedly localised nature of organic food is claimed to have reduced the food miles inherent in conventional food commodity chains and produced a trusting (re)connection between the anxious consumer and the responsive producer (Jackson et al., 2006; Thiers, 2002; Winter, 2003). As DuPuis and Goodman (2005) emphasise, the local has offered a space in which particular ethical norms and values could flourish, and organic food systems could thus become strongly embedded in ethics of care, stewardship and agrarian vision, ranging from resistance to anomic and contradictory capitalist forces in the US, to a more Eurocentric rural imaginary in which cultural identity has grown out of more pluralistic approaches to rural development (see also Marsden et al., 2002). Research in New Zealand (for example, Coombes and Campbell, 1998) has emphasised the ability of organic farming to run on agricultural time and to rest on seemingly conflict-free local values and knowledges, thus constituting a conscious response to the contradictions of capitalism (see also Morgan and Murdoch, 2000). National contexts of the local vary considerably, however, and as Campbell and Liepins (2001) emphasise, in New Zealand the preoccupation of agribusiness with export markets means that the domestic organic market is often left to small-scale farmers. In ethical terms, then, these localist politics of food imply a production and consumption of food which is undertaken within a spatialised ethics of care and health (Hartwick, 1998; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004), in which the connectedness and closeness between producers and consumers is consummated in practical relationships based on mutual regard (Sage, 2003). Local food thereby achieves an “alternative” ethics through re-embeddedness both in local ecologies (Murdoch et al., 2000) and local social relationships (Friedmann, 1994). Local food brings local freedom (Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002) spurning the shaping of the locale by distant others in favour of a local which

represents a place of caring resistance, a place of hope, an unfolding line of flight which counterposes the demands of globalised capital (Murdoch and Miele, 1999, 2002; Murdoch et al., 2000).

This positive gloss on the politics and ethics of local alternative food systems has prompted a stream of critique emphasising the need to explore the ambiguities and disconnections inherent therein. Excellent reviews by Allen et al. (2003), DuPuis and Goodman (2005) and Hinrichs (2000, 2003) highlight three significant areas of disquiet. First, there is a need for caution over the unreflexive localisms which arise from an emancipatory food agenda that relies so heavily on the mobilisation of place-centred imaginaries (DuPuis, 2002; Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). As Hinrichs (2003) argues, given that globalisation and localisation are related and mutually constituting, it is to be expected that desirable social and environmental outcomes will not map directly and neatly onto the spatial content of any socially constructed “local”. In other words, localist food regimes will not be inherently just in their labour and environment relations (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000), neither will they become equally available to all social groups of consumers (Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002). Secondly, the ethical values attached to local alternative food systems may be internally contradictory. For example, Allen et al. (2003) argue that emphasis on localism will often privilege ecological sustainability over social justice, not least because the former will be regulated more directly than the latter. Indeed, the very nature of regulation may expose contradictions within ecological sustainability itself. Lockie and Kitto (2000) highlight the potential risk that the meaning of “organic” food will alter as organics become bifurcated in the regulatory arena into a concern for environment and a concern for health, as differences emerge in the compliance with certification requirements in these two areas. Thirdly, there is the danger that the political and ethical trappings of organic food systems will be subverted in a process of “mainstreaming” through corporate co-option (see Kaltoft, 1999). As “quality” food products are increasingly able to secure premium prices, so organic agriculture is increasingly being used to generate excess profits as part of a market-led and value-added commercial model (Goodman, D., 2004).

These concerns are neatly captured by Guthman’s (1998, 2003, 2004) account of organic agriculture in California, which, she claims, used to be centred around sustainability (“farming in nature’s image”) but is now focussed on resource dependency (“farming off of nature’s image”), dominated as it is by agro-food firms with their international marketing, reliance on fossil fuels and value-added processing. Organic certification agencies, operating in competition with each other, are compromised by their need to protect the interests of their fee-paying members. Standards, therefore, emphasise inputs rather than methods, and certification has become sufficiently costly to exclude small and poorly capitalised operations. Guthman suggests that, whereas organic food used to be a form of

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