

Knowing food – a privilege for the concerned consumer? A research programme on organic urban-rural relationships

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Abstract

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is increasingly practised in different countries all over the world and can be seen as a step towards a new style of urban-rural relationship. However, it is argued that CSA is an “utopian entertainment for a few middle class consumers and their fortunate few farmer friends” (Goodman and DuPuis 2002, p. 17). Often, such CSA projects rest on organic agriculture, a farming system which in turn provides food mainly to the middle class of well-educated concerned consumers (Morgan and Murdoch 2000). Thus, one could argue that organic CSA is a highly exclusive concept, and that, in consequence, building urban-rural relationships depends on a small part of society ignoring, for example, poorer, often less educated consumers.

This paper outlines the planned research accompanying a pilot CSA project in a Swiss city targeted at less educated people without special concerns (or the budget needed) for healthy, organic or otherwise alternative food. It thereby critically reflects the predominance of middle class consumers in the urban-rural relationship. With the help of ethnographic methods, such as participatory observation and in-depth (narrative) interviews, the project will explore (learning) processes that lead to “knowing” food in CSA.

Conceiving of the production-consumption relationship as a discourse sees consumer actions as political when they exercise “the capacity to act” in a way that affects future society (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). The project will study in how far the target group of less educated people participates in this political action. It furthermore explores if there are processes which could empower them to decide deliberately whether or not to take part in such political action, and to effectuate their “right to know” (Allen and Kovach 2000), thus democratizing the urban-rural link.

Political consumerism

In the discourse on sustainable development, alternative food supply chains play a major role. On the one hand, organic and fair trade products are discussed as being part of an increasing 'alternative market'. On the other hand, such alternative food supply chains are localised food chains, such as box schemes, farmers' markets, and community supported agriculture where consumers are directly involved in the production process of food. The emergence of such alternative food chains demonstrates an increasing dissatisfaction of consumers and producers with the dominant market structures. In the first case, consumers wish to purchase healthier food, food which is produced in an environmentally sound way, or respecting the needs and rights of producers in developing countries. In the case of local food chains, consumers and producers are said to meet in their dissatisfaction with the dominant market structures where often, market power is biased towards a few large retailers. By selling their produce locally, producers hope to increase their income and bypass the power of the retailers, while retaining their autonomy in deciding on what and how to produce, and to whom to sell. By purchasing locally, consumers express their wish to support the local economy, as well as to engage in a closer relationship with the producers who step out of anonymity (Moore 2006).

The argument, at least implicitly, goes that participating in such an alternative food chain is a political act (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). Political consumerism can be defined as including "social, cultural, animal-related, and environmental concerns that go beyond the immediate self-interests of the individual consumer or household" (Klintman and Boström 2006, p. 401). It furthermore involves making a choice, i.e. being able to make a choice between different products. Critics argue that political consumerism does not work at the level of the individual, because individual consumers have only a "secondary relationship" to the goods and services they buy. Consumers depend on the choices made by the producers on what is produced (Holzer 2006). However, in the context of local food chains, one could argue that this choice to a large extent lies with the retailers and/or processors, and that in conventional food supply chains, the producers also only have a "secondary relationship" to the goods they produce. As a consequence, local food chains would turn the secondary relationships both of consumers and producers into "primary relationships". Or, put differently, local food chains mean political consumerism as well as political 'producerism'.

Nevertheless, at the heart of political consumerism lies the idea (or the prerequisite) of a choice to be made by consumers. Such a choice has to be enabled both by offering a variety of products to choose from, and the means (economic and cultural) to purchase them.

Political consumerism involves three dimensions: trust, insight, and influence. *Trust* involves the trust of consumers in the validity, relevance and political potential of activities. *Insight* concerns the levels of knowledge that consumers have of ideas, policies and possible activities of political consumerism. *Influence* is about the consequences of political consumerism beyond the concrete purchasing choice, e.g. at forums where consumers can protest as a collective to influence producers or stakeholders more effectively (Klintman and Boström 2006). Thus, political consumerism includes a high level of cognitive effort; in particular the insight dimension involves providing consumers with detailed and often complex information. Following the argument of the ‘risk society’ (Beck 1986), political consumerism can be interpreted as a “reflexive taste” (Guthman 2002). Again, this notion points at the need for information, i.e. knowledge about the production process.

If alternative consumption (i.e. local and/or organic) is seen as one possibility of participating in political consumerism, this might therefore limit the participation in such an action to those willing to engage in an intellectual exercise. This exclusion phenomenon is the focus of the next section.

Social exclusion through CSA and organics? – Hypotheses II

The term ‘social exclusion’ refers to “strategies that groups adopt to separate outsiders from themselves, preventing them to have access to valued resources” (Giddens et al. 2005, p.239). Such social exclusion strategies usually followed by a social system should be distinguished from deliberate self-exclusion of individuals or groups (Bohn 2006). From these considerations it can be questioned how exclusionary organic farming actually is. It is certainly not a state strategy to deprive a certain class of consumers from organic food. Rather, in particular in its beginnings as a social movement, it can be seen as a process of self-exclusion of people who were dissatisfied with the predominant system of food production, and wanted to test and engage in an alternative way of production and consumption. Organic farming was thus the expression of ideals of a minority that deliberately excluded itself from the rest of the society. With the years, organic farming has (partly) changed its face, and is not anymore restricted to those ‘outsiders’ working for an alternative food system, but is aiming at reaching a much broader audience. In recent times, organic consumption has become part of the so-called “life style of health and sustainability” (LOHAS) (Ernst & Young AG 2007). Hence, organics is not only seen and marketed as environmentally sound food production, but also as a healthy way of nutrition. And this aspect makes the organic industry suddenly appear

ambivalent. If organic food is really healthier than conventional food, it becomes relevant who can consume organic, and who cannot¹.

In the food supply chain, exclusion can work through the quality, the price and the location (Marsden 2004). All three ways seem possible for organic farming. First, it is a distinct quality, which secondly, most of the times, is more expensive than conventionally produced food. Having said this, it should be noted that organic consumers do not forcedly spend more money on food than conventional consumers. Often, they buy more thoughtfully so that less food rots in their fridge, and they often also buy less so-called 'convenience food', which is usually more expensive than raw products. In terms of location, organic products have become less and less exclusive during the past years as they are increasingly available in supermarkets. Organic shops or organic farmers' markets however remain exclusive shopping places that attract a specific clientele, not least of the above-mentioned 'well educated middle-class' (Morgan and Murdoch 2000; Richter 2005). Once again, one should not overestimate the exclusionary aspect of organic farming. Although enjoying an increasing attention by consumers and producers, it remains a life style of a minority, reaching app. 4% of the agricultural area in the EU, with a market share ranging from 2.5% in the UK to 4.5% in Denmark and Switzerland (Willer et al. 2008). Still, we can see some tendencies of exclusion, and for sure, at least the image of organic products has something exclusive².

Grant (2001) stresses the fact that exclusion can take both an economic and a cultural form. While being economically inactive (as e.g. unemployed) remains an important source of social exclusion, the cultural form becomes increasingly relevant. This form may for instance be experienced by migrants, but also by the elderly. Exclusion includes the feeling of being excluded from the mainstream of social activity, and the socially excluded cease to share the same values, goals and perspectives of the incorporated members of society (Grant 2001). Shucksmith (2000) argues in a discussion about LEADER projects for rural development that "the very process of construction of culture-territories will exclude and disempower some residents of these localities if they do not feel affinity with the constructed cultural identity" (Shucksmith 2000, p. 210). Analogously, CSA projects are developed between farmers and consumers who construct them as a certain culture, to which only a few consumers feel

¹ However, it can be questioned whether the organic industry should be blamed for this. Other products (companies) also claim to be healthy, and sell their products at a higher price especially for this reason. So, it is rather the question whether the state assumes the argument of the organic industry and undertakes actions to make organic products cheaper so that poorer consumers can purchase them.

² This critique has been used by discounters in Germany who launched own organic brands, and promote them with the claim „Bio für Alle“ („organic for everybody“).

attracted while many other consumers do not feel any affinity to this culture, and are thus excluded. Goodman and DuPuis argue that CSA is an “utopian entertainment for a few middle class consumers and their fortunate few farmer friends” (Goodman and DuPuis 2002, p. 17).

So, the question is whether there is a way to empower people to overcome this exclusion trap. The following section will argue that organic CSA has the potential to initiate such processes.

The potential of organic CSA to overcome exclusion and facilitate empowerment – Hypotheses II

Empowerment can be defined as “the linkage of individual capacities (self-esteem and self-efficacy) and capabilities (knowledge and skills) to enable effective collaborative action in order to obtain collective socio-political goals” (Grant 2001). It can be divided into three processes and the desired outcome of these processes: First, intrapersonal empowerment including self-esteem and self-efficacy; second, instrumental empowerment meaning the acquisition of knowledge and skills; third, political participation. The wished outcome of these processes is substantive empowerment.

So far, organic CSA projects have not engaged in activities to purposively involve people who may be socially excluded. Rather, it seems that there has been a high demand by concerned consumers so that farmers starting such a business did not have to search for their clientele, but the clientele was already there.

I will now turn to look at the potentials that lie precisely in such practices or activities, as organic CSA. These potentials take to directions. On the one hand, organic CSA activities are a means to increase the information level of people about food production, and on the other hand, such activities are a way to participate consumers in food production. In the logic of empowerment described above, this means that organic CSA could potentially contribute to instrumental empowerment by providing new knowledge and skills, increasing intrapersonal empowerment, because harvesting the produce one has taken care of increases self-esteem, and by promoting (political) participation. In the long run, such processes can then facilitate a political consumerism: They show consumers possible activities (insight) which they can trust (they immediately see the effects of their doing), and open up the possibility to further engage in political activities (influence).

Although markets are not enough to achieve social change, Allen and Kovach (2000) argue that organic farming contributes to ‘defetishizing’ food, i.e. to increase transparency in the

food chain and to reveal production methods. As a consequence, alienation between production and consumption is reduced and environmental awareness and responsibility among producers and consumers alike is promoted, and civil society is strengthened. From the point of view of Allen and Kovach, this could support and provide new resources for a social movement aiming at social change. In his study on alternative strategies in the UK agro-food system, Kirwan (2004) concludes that there are actually reflexive consumers participating, and also the producers engage in such alternatives for more than only commodity exchange. He showed the potential of alternative food systems to develop trust between consumers and producers, and that participating consumers did so also out of a political will to support a retail outlet that was different from the dominant one. They also appreciate regaining some control over the assessment of food they are buying. McMichael (2000) points to the power that food has, and in his view will increasingly have in future. As he argues, it has “become a focus of contention and resistance to a corporate takeover of life itself” (McMichael 2000, p.32). He argues that, by directly linking producers and consumers CSAs eliminate the physical and social distancing involved in corporate agriculture.

In conclusion, we can observe a number of arguments in favour of organic CSA as a way to support political consumerism. The question therefore becomes crucial how to open up this possibility of political participation to the broad population. That is, how to empower people to choose their preferred way of food purchase, and how to provide structures that facilitate making such a choice.

The following section presents the research questions related to this overriding aim of a pilot project of an organic CSA targeted specifically at consumers who are rather untypical for ‘organic consumers’ (i.e. for instance, less educated, not middle class, not particularly concerned about environmental and health issues,...)

Questions and Methodology

The focus of the planned research will be on learning processes that take place between farmers and users, as well as among the users about the production processes and general characteristics of organic food and the food chain. In this way, I hope to gain insight in processes that lead to empowerment of people in the food chain as one facet of the urban-rural relationship.

As has been shown, if a CSA project is merely 'offered' to 'the' consumers, this will likely result in the well-known picture of concerned consumers looking for an alternative food supply. Therefore, it is interesting to study the following questions.

1. What are factors/influences that inhibit participation of less educated, low-income consumers in (organic) CSAs?
2. What are effective ways to approach the target group?
3. Which (cultural) conflicts can be observed?
 - a. Between users and the farmer
 - b. Among users
4. Which learning processes take place?
 - a. By users
 - b. By the farmer
 - c. By other involved persons/institutions (organic farming organization, the city department in charge of integration/migration,...)
 - d. By the larger civil society in the region
5. What are the effects/implications of the project on the wider environment of the participating people?
 - a. Gender roles in the users' families
 - b. Level of integration in the society
6. Do participants in the project feel empowered to influence the food network, that is the way in which food is produced and distributed?
7. Can organic CSA contribute to new urban-rural relationships?

To study these research questions I choose the approach of action research, because this approach includes 'cycles of action and reflection' (Ladkin 2004) that, in my opinion, mirror the approach and the objectives of the whole project. Learning processes should be seen as a result from such cycles of action and reflection between the researcher and the 'research subject'.

In particular, the methods will include participant observation to collect information about the processes going on during starting up the project, as well as during the whole project duration. In this way, I hope to gain insight in the processes of knowledge generation and a possible change in attitudes and awareness of the participants.

Furthermore, in-depth narrative interviews will reveal the factors underlying the decisions of taking part in the pilot project, as well as the interests of the 'consumers' in 'knowing' food.

Semi-structured interviews will be carried out with all persons involved in the pilot project, such as the farmer, the consumers (users), persons involved from the city administrations (i.e. the departments in charge of both agriculture and social issues).

Finally, also the researcher is involved in the learning processes. Therefore, the methods chosen need to involve a critical reflection of the position of the researcher towards the project, the research subject, and the development of these attitudes along the project duration.

The case study

As a case to study the above discussed concepts, a pilot project of CSA is planned in a Swiss city (Zurich). CSA is a form of agriculture that aims at bringing together production and consumption of food in an alternative network. The heading includes different forms of such networks, but all have in common that the risk of production (loss) is shared between producers and consumers. In many such initiatives, consumers purchase, at the beginning of a season, the right to consume a fixed share of the year's production. The producers provide the food in boxes in regular intervals (often weekly) directly to the consumers, or to depots. In some cases, the consumers are also involved in production activities, for instance, by subscribing to the scheme, they agree to work a few days per season on the farm, helping with weeding, harvesting or packaging. In other CSA projects, the consumers 'buy' the right to work on a defined plot, which is a cross section of the crops (mostly different vegetables or fruits) that the farmer planted at the beginning of the season. Such a CSA type is planned for the pilot project. After planting, the consumers take over the responsibility for the further management of the plot and the harvesting of the crops. Thus, the production risk lies mainly with the single consumer or 'user' of the plot. At the end of the season (i.e. after harvesting), the responsibility for the land is given back to the farmer who undertakes the work needed to prepare the field for the next season. This type of CSA integrates consumers directly in the production process, and gives them a large responsibility for production, the more as they can

decide to plant some extra vegetables on their plots if they wish to. The users can ask the farmer for information and help concerning crop production, so that there is direct contact between the producer, and the user who rather plays the role of a 'co-producer' than a mere consumer of farm products. The users also interact with each other, helping out with tools or know-how, exchanging the harvested vegetables.

Setting up this pilot project will involve not only the farmer of the participating farm. As has been argued, the ambition is to deliberately involve 'untypical' participants. Therefore, extra efforts have to be undertaken to reach the potential users at which this project is aimed. In consequence, the municipal administration will be involved in planning and setting up the project, in particular the department for social affairs, and migration. In addition civil society organizations in which potential users may be assembled will be contacted as a gateway to these users. A broad embedding of the project within the wider societal environment shall contribute to its long-term success.

Conclusion

With this paper I hope to have sketched out a few important questions concerning how urban-rural relationships are shaped by food networks. On the one side, it has been shown that building such relationships on organic CSA involves a high level of knowledge. On the other side, it is hypothesized that it is this organic CSA which has some potential to empower people to actively take part and shape the link between the urban and the rural. The suggested research should shed light into the learning processes involved.

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