

Organic food consumption

- between the Market, Everyday Life and Vision of a Sustainable Food Culture

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Abstract - The paper will shortly present some of the conclusions from my Ph.D. dissertation "Organic Food Consumption between the Market, Everyday Life and Vision of a Sustainable Food Culture" (2006). I will discuss how to develop the organic food consumption in a sustainable direction and how to understand food consumption as part of everyday life and the food culture in general.

INTRODUCTION

The overall perspective of the dissertation has been to discuss consumption of organic food in relation to sustainable development in its broad sense as the The Brundtland Commission (1987) proclaimed it and later by Wolfgang Sachs and the Wuppertal Institute (2000) related to regionalization of food production, changes in lifestyles and values etc. Even though organic production historically has been rooted in such broader visions for sustainable development, the actual development of the organic sector has led to a much more narrow interpretation of the concept of the organic. A subject which in recent years has been critically discussed by scholars (Kaltoft 2004, Noe 2004, Miele 2001, Guthman 2002, 2004, Lang & Heasman 2004 m.fl.).

I have examined consumption of organic foods in relation to 1) the sale of organic foods in the supermarkets 2) organic food in public sector catering 3) organic food consumption in everyday life.² The purpose of throwing light on organics from different perspectives and contexts originates in the wish to understand the different meanings, structures and experiences attached to organic foods. The organic production and consumption in Denmark has been celebrated as a big success in the 1990'ties, but in 2000 the progress dwelled of and since then the optimism has been more moderate.

Currently there is a widespread belief in the ability of the market to cope with the environmental challenges, e.g. through organic consumption. My research reveals a more complex picture. Firstly, the development of the food market has led to still increasing concentrations of power, which impair the voice and position of the consumers, the consumer organisations and other NGO's (Lang and Heasman 2004, Marsden et.al. 2000). Secondly, because of the ambivalence connected with food consumption within an everyday life perspective (Gronow & Warde 2001, Halkier 1999, Holm 2003). Environmental problems do not reduce this complexity, because the organic products represent not only a positive option, but also a number of dilemmas, because the supply of foods, time, economic concerns, food habits and social meanings connected with food (etc.) are putting restrictions on the consumption of organics.

ORGANIC FOOD CONSUMPTION VIEWED FROM AN EVERYDAY LIFE PERSPECTIVE

Part of my empirical research has been carried out as qualitative interviews with citizens who buy organic foods in a smaller or larger amount, focussing on how organic food were understood and handled in everyday-life.³ Research within the field have pointed to a controversy between attitudes towards organic foods and the actual practice (Wier 2003, Beckman m.fl. 2001) and I was interested in throwing light on this discrepancy. Furthermore food consumption and food habits has been described as part of everyday life agendas, routines and more broadly the food culture in society and the development of the food market (Warde 1997, Lang og Heasman 2004, Holm 2003, O'Doherty Jensen 2003, Halkier 1999, 2001), and my research confirms that these dimensions play an important role.

In my analyses I have outlined five important dimensions related to the different understandings of organic food and experiences with organic food consumption. They illustrate the complexity and dilemmas in relation to food consumption and everyday life in the light of late modern issues to risk, environmental problems, the food market, as well as more social and cultural dimensions related to everyday life.

- The wish for healthy foods and sustainable development
- Issues of risk, uncertainty and disembedding
- Limitations related to the food market, as well as the amount of time and money the consumers are able to spend on (organic) food consumption
- Cultural and Social dimensions related to food and meals (and how organic foods may fit into habits and meanings)
- Organic consumption as a political statement

These dimensions reveal a complex picture of organic food consumption. All the interview persons express critique of the conventional food production and wishes for a more sustainable development in general. But at the same time they find it very difficult to meet these demands in their own everyday life and they feel uncertain about whom to trust and to what degree their consumption (as well as other practices) matters at all. But some of them emphasize on the idea "that you at least can take care of your family and what is close to you" and they wish for a more sustainable future. But all the interview persons share the experience that in the everyday life they are not able to do the right things in all situations (ranging from the wish for a healthy diet, not drive a car, always buy environmental products etc.)

My research points out that the persons interviewed have serious doubts concerning their influence as con-

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² The research is based on a qualitative and abductive methodology, which points at the dynamic relation between theory, together with meta-theoretical reflections of power relations and critical discussions of tendencies in the development of the society as such (Flyvbjerg, 1991, Alvesson og Skoldberg 2000).

³ I have carried out 3 group interviews and 5 individual interviews, as well as a number of exitinterviews (in front of supermarkets) and short interviews with parents at a school.

sumers. A majority feel uncertain and powerless in relation to the environmental problems and to their role as (political) consumers. They call for other actors to take more responsibility and rejects at the same time that they should take on the responsibility for the sustainable development of the food sector and society in general.

PUBLIC SECTOR CATERING AND SUPERMARKETS

I have also carried out a study of consumption spaces to create a broader understanding of the consumption contexts we meet as consumers today. The supermarkets represent the mainstream consumption space with 85% of the organic sale, but the organic products represent only a small niche within the supermarkets and the retail sector in general. Coop Denmark have historically been the leading outlet for organics, but today Coop Denmark are less focused on organics (except the small supermarket chain Irma, owned by Coop Denmark) and more oriented towards the Nordic market.

The discount chain Netto has been staking at more organic offers, but has not until now, enlarged the number of organic products in their permanent assortment. In general the supermarkets in Denmark are positive towards organic food products and they are aware of the symbolic value of organics and having a green image. But at the same time they do not feel committed to develop their organic sector or the food sector in general in a more sustainable direction. The supermarkets are oriented at competition at the global level and the discount market. They are positive toward the organic brand but they are in general not interested in having too many products which is produced locally and by small producers, because their structure and organisations not are oriented at such food links.

The public sector catering represents a very different consumption space for organic foods. In the last teen years public kitchens in Copenhagen, in Roskilde and at West Zealand (among others) have carried out very interesting projects aimed at creating organic and sustainable meals for children in schools, kindergartens, nursing homes, hospitals (etc.) These projects represent important knowledge and competences regarding organic food making.

I have carried out a case study of the school canteens in Roskilde that offers fully organic meals to the children. And the kitchen managers can tell about very interesting experiences about how to communicate about health and environment, as well as how to adapt to the habits and taste of the children. The schools (and other public caterers) represent other perspectives and competences compared to the supermarkets. The public caterers have been experimenting with development of meals including 50-100% organic products, and at the same time combining the wish for organic food with demands of making healthy, tasty and cheap food.

Present health problems with obesity and diseases related to unhealthy food habits and lifestyles have pointed out the need to develop the food culture in general in a more healthy direction and the experiences within the public sector have shown that organic conversion projects have combined these dimensions successfully.

CONCLUSION

Against the background of the studies and discussions presented in my dissertation, I will point out the need for a broader perspective for the development of the organic consumption. Other kinds of market-places must be developed as a supplement to the (ever more) dominating supermarkets and retail conglomerates, as well as different kind of actors.

To create a sustainable food sector and food culture in the society in general we need to include perspectives from the everyday life and development of knowledge and skills about healthy and sustainable food production, organic food products and cooking.

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