

People, place and participation. Bringing together organic and place – insights from Austria and the US

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Abstract

Deliberate policies and programs designed to identify and promote specific places (or terroir) could favor expanded organic production and market development. More specific relationship built on organic and geographically indicated products and practices might offer opportunities to set priorities and identify smart strategies for enhancing the promotion of organic. One strategy to do so might be derived from the organic principles underlying organic participatory guarantee systems (PGS). This paper draws upon several years of field research and experience in Michigan (US) and in Austria to explore how the concepts of collective participation, typicity and governmentality can unite organic and terroir efforts to promote rural development.

Introduction

Those who currently promote *terroir* production and products (geographical indications) frequently share and celebrate a similar commitment as organic farmers to specific ecosystems, to traditions and to the quality of life for all involved. Given current challenges to both organic and *terroir* production from capital-intensive farms and food industry political lobbies, public investment in market protection and promotion could prove to be difficult, especially in the US. In Austria, the term *terroir* is used mainly by the wine industry, while the concept of "taste/food regions" (*Genussregionen*) represents a closely related approach. Consequently, a more effective strategy might be derived from the organic principles underlying organic participatory guarantee systems (PGS). Such an approach might be based on a "process of participative and deliberative democracy".

Material and methods

This paper draws upon several years of parallel field research, five years of jointly authored academic papers and presentations and a recently completed book manuscript on "re-thinking organic" to be published by Springer. More specifically, this paper reflects upon several years of close association and conversations with organic growers and especially those engaged in the direct marketing of their products. In the US, these ideas underlie a new non-profit initiative to promote "American origin products" from specific and different ago-ecological regions in the US.

Results

Of specific interest, these processes could draw upon at least three shared features of PGS and "origin" or *terroir* products: active collective participation by producers, processors, and consumers; focus on typicity of the social-historical-ecological qualities of specific food products and practices; and, public, governmentality (Bingen 2012)(Padel 2010).

Farmers, consumers, and often, processors, collaborate in creating, managing and enforcing participatory guarantee systems. The organic standards are sometimes even more strict than those used by third party certifiers (Källander 2008). Based on the PGS principle of sharing knowledge and experiences among all stakeholders, an organic *terroir* perspective could be developed.

Typicity. This concept emphasizes the social-historical-ecological qualities of specific food products and practices. It draws attention to the constructed nature of *terroir* and the human activities that are expressed in a specific place through particular skills, social patterns, practices and perceptions. Typicity emerges from the "human activities [in a particular locality] expressed through particular skills, social patterns, practices and perceptions" (Bérard and Marchenay 2008:17). In addition "shared knowledge" is a "distinctive characteristic of local production. It may relate to a particular breeding or growing practice, special curdling or refin-

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ing techniques, or indeed any production method or mode of consumption that helps to define a product and root it in local culture” (27).

Collectivity. Collective organization is the masterpiece of origin products/geographical indications. A collective, commonly involving producers, processors/companies and government, is responsible for identifying, maintaining, promoting quality and defending interests of all the members of the collective. A geographical indication or origin product is the result of a coming to agreement and an on-going conversation within the collective on the “place”, and a “code of practices” governing production, processing and sometimes marketing. With an agreement in place, a geographical indication becomes public property that is held and protected by the state, not by an individuals or private firms. The Missouri Regional Cuisines Project illustrates a somewhat similar effort to create associations among businesses, public agencies, non-profit groups and residents, and draw attention to the food ways characteristic of the region.

However, the challenge for these groups, and others like them in different US regions, involves developing their capacity to work collectively. Unlike some organic groups (e.g., those organized around participatory guarantee principles) these groups confront challenges that GI producers find challenging: how to “define and maintain ... GIs characteristics and values” (Allaire, Casabianca et al. 2011).

Governmentality. Public, governmental involvement in this process and its on-going commitment to, and support for protecting the code of practices is a third essential feature that ties organic to geographical indications. This involves much more than a regulatory or policing function, but active advocacy for, and defense of producer and processor interests. This support is commonly connected with broader commitments that supports policies focused on, but not restricted to, keeping smaller farmers on the land but is also threatened by budget cuts.

Discussion

Typicity. Groups of “speciality crop” growers in Michigan, hops growers, viticulture) are beginning to promote the “terroir” of their crops by defining the territory of production, the crop history and traditions, specific characteristics of varieties and of their growing practices. With financial support from local governments, the Austrian *Genussregionen* were established in 2005 (Groier 2007; Greiner 2009). The use of the concept has been challenged and the criteria for typicity in these regions could be more clearly defined.

Collectivity. The Northwest Michigan Food & Farming Network illustrates one approach to associate and advance the shared interests and activities in a region. In Austria, the *GenussRegionen Marketing GmbH* is a collaboration of producers, processors and the government that seeks to define new regionally specific products and to associate all the partners (Kastner and Mendoza 2012).

Governmentality. In the US, there is more often an adversarial, not a collaborative, relationship between (especially smaller farmers) and most governmental agencies. In Austria *Genussregionen* are a central marketing strategy (Kastner and Mendoza 2012) to strengthen rural development, and not specifically organic farming (Straub 2012). Nevertheless, consumers associate these products with organic agriculture (Fürtbauer, Spreitzer et al. 2011).

Suggestions to tackle with the future challenges of organic

Production and marketing strategies could be designed to foster transparency among organic farmers and consumers and the geographic area of organic production could be celebrated (c.f. Schermer 2005; Risku-Norja and Mikkola 2009). Deliberate efforts to encourage local socio-economic and ecological conditions by promoting small-scale production and processing could be designed. In this way, bringing “organic” and *terroir* closer could contribute to the development of a “revised embeddedness concept” (Kjeldsen and Alrøe 2006). GI-Organic collaboration also offers new opportunities for incorporating the principles of organic agriculture into the definition of GIs.

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