

English summary

Talking about organic food¹

When we talk about something like organic food - in sociology as well as in everyday life - we take it as a given that this something has but a single meaning. We may feel we know very well what it means or we might only have a faint idea, but we presuppose that the something has but a single meaning. This dissertation questions this assumption in the case of organic food. When a consumer sees the word 'organic' or an organic label on a food on the market, s/he can interpret this 'sign' in a number of ways. The authors of the sign – the organic producers and public authorities - have no control over how the sign is interpreted. In any one situation, the number of possible interpretations is of course limited, but I make a principled decision to analyse all the ways in which people talk about, and all the meanings, which they bring to, the term 'organic food'.

The dissertation analyses, firstly, the meanings and values ascribed - both orally and in writing - to 'organic food'. The hypothesis is that several meanings are in play in the field. Secondly, the dissertation attempts to achieve "a grasp" of consumer interest in organic food in Denmark. Taking as its starting point social theoretical interpretations of this interest, the dissertation develops its own interpretation of consumer interest in organic food and, in the

1. The Danish title, *Italesættelser af Økologisk Mad*, uses a more uncommon term than 'talking'. The term comes from the translation of Foucault's expression "mise en discours" (Foucault 1976: 50).

In Danish 'organic food' is called *økologisk mad*, which literally means 'ecological food'. This has to do with the specific history of organic farming in Denmark (*økologisk jordbrug*) and gives somewhat different connotations. But in most cases the translation into 'organic food' is adequate and will be used in this summary.

process, new interpretations of the meaning of ‘organic food’.

The *background* for the thesis was the dramatic change in consumer interest in organic food in Denmark which departed from a supermarket advertising campaign, which was launched in week 29 (July) in 1993. In the beginning of 1993 only half the total production of organic milk in Denmark could be sold as organic; by the middle of 1994 the production could not meet the demand. The Danish newspapers talked about an “organic boom”. Sales of organic food continued to grow for the rest of the decade. In the new millennium sales of organic food in Denmark has stagnated on a high level (5.5 % of food sales). So the so called “organic boom” and Danish consumer interest in organic food are conspicuous phenomena that call for interpretation by a “social analyst”.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is not an off-the-shelf method, so it must be adapted the project and phenomenon at hand. The dissertation therefore cannot inform the reader which predetermined type of discourse analysis it employs. This analysis of the meaning of organic food is inspired by existing discourse analyses - not least *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1972). As a reading strategy the analysis focuses upon what the texts *says* - suspending the context beyond the text - to be open to the odd things the text says, the very obvious things it says, and everything in between. Against the background of this focus on the dispersion of statements, the regularities of the statements in the text material stand out. The regularities are called discourses. Unlike most discourse analyses, this thesis analyses a field of several discourses and their interaction. To handle that plurality of discourses ‘organic’ is seen as a “floating signifier” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985): the meaning floats from statement to statement because of overdetermination. Seen from the speakers point of view the plurality of discourses is an “interpretative repertoire” (Potter and Wetherell 1987), which the speaker can draw upon in talking about organic food.

The *text material* analysed consists mainly of articles about organic food and organic farming from the Danish national newspapers (excepting tabloids) and in the magazine *Samvirke*² for the period 1981 - 2000. Further texts (including more recent ones) about organic food is also analysed. In addition, one focus group interview was conducted; five consumers from a

2. The magazine is published by the Danish coop-movement and distributed to its members.

circle of friends participated. The analysis comprises 1990 texts in all.

I have found nine discourses in the talk about organic food.

Table of discourses found

Name of discourse	In the perspective of the discourse organic food is...	Strength and history
The agronomic discourse of organic farming	Organic food is seen as products of a distinctive way of farming.	The sine qua non of organic food, but is only one of many discourses in the 1990's.
The alternative lifestyle discourse	Organic food is connected with a whole alternative way of life.	Significant in the early 1980's, but fades out in the 1990's.
The environmental discourse	Organic food is seen as environmentally friendly foods.	One of two dominating discourses, strongest in the mid 1980's.
The discourse of the political consumer	Buying organic food sends a political message.	Significant from 1994 to the end of the 1990's.
The economic discourse	'Organic' is a quality that can be measured in economic quantities.	Significant in marking the limits, but gives no positive meaning to organic food.
The national discourse	Organic food is better because it is produced in Denmark and/or according to Danish rules.	Seldom found..
The health discourse	Organic food is a means to attempt to master one's health.	One of two dominating discourses, strongest in the second half of the 1990's.
The discourse of animal ethics	Organic food is food produced while considering animal welfare.	Significant from the mid 1990's.
The gastronomic discourse	Organic food is quality food, food produced with care.	Significant from the mid 1990's..

The dissertation makes a point of not only finding and analysing discourses, but also analysing their interaction (1) in single texts, (2) in the text material as such and (3) in the history of the changing ways of talking about organic food.

- 1) Nearly all texts of some length draw upon more than one discourse. Some texts are written from the perspective of one discourse, but includes one or more statements drawing upon (an)other discourse(s). Other texts mix statements from different discourses - e.g. a consumer is described as buying organic food for the sake of her children's health and, second-

arily, for the sake of the environment. Other discourses are drawn upon to supplement the picture and to untangle inconsistencies.

- 2) I characterise the field of discourses around organic food as a *conflictual consensus*. The field is conflictual because the different discourses are potentially at odds with one another about the meaning of ‘organic’. But they are not often in open conflict, a consensus is presupposed. Let me emphasize that I have not found a consensus on a common meaning of ‘organic’ in all discourses. But a consensus is presupposed in the talk about organic food e.g. in debates over if and how the rules of organic production should be amended. Should the conflictual consensus disappear it will mean either open conflict over what ‘organic’ is or that one discourse has become hegemonic in the field. In either case I suspect that consumer interest will decrease.
- 3) In the beginning ‘organic’ referred a production method, but around 1990 it begins to refer to certain foods bearing the word ‘organic’ or an organic label. The interest in organic *farming* still existed in the newspapers in the 1990’s, but it nearly drowns in the fast growing interest in the consumption of organic food. In light of the so-called organic boom consumer demand is seen as the driving force in converting agriculture to organic production. Parallel to these changes discourses connected to organic farming become weaker and discourses connected to organic food become stronger - see table.

Currently, I find a tendency that organic food becomes an ‘ordinary special category’ of foods and not a ‘extraordinary special category’ of foods, as in the first 20 years. For example is the fact that a food product is ‘organic’ not in it self a good story i news papers anymore.

Based on the discourse analysis I interpret the organic boom and the general consumer interest in organic food in all Denmark as the convergence of several cultural streams (until now called discourses) in the category organic food.

A Social Analytic Interpretation

I found “statements” in the text material saying that buying organic food was, respectively, a way to send a political message, to make an ethical choice, or to consume food which tasted better. Therefor the social analytic interpretation is divided into three chapters. All three statements raise fundamental questions about the relation between individuality and sociality. And indeed, social science offers theories of “political consumption”, of “food ethics”, and of

social similarities and differences in taste (sociology of consumption). Nevertheless, these are questions which cannot be adequately treated within the scope of this dissertation's discourse analysis.

The consumption of organic food is making a *political* impact in Denmark - it is a case of 'consumer power'. But can it properly be called "political consumption" when it is questionable how often buying organic food constitutes an intentional political act? To use a term of Ulrich Beck's (1999) the consumption of organic food seems to be "passive subpolitics". The reality of 'consumer power' nevertheless does not prevent some consumers from feeling powerless - quite the contrary. To see oneself as a political consumer is to find oneself in a "subject position", which not only offers opportunities but which also carries potentially heavy responsibilities. 'Consumer power' is a result of a new "personal sovereignty" which is insisting on autonomy, expressing itself through the market and are odds with the existing idea of sovereignty as distributed between state and citizens.

When *ethics* is applied to food and consumption, the focus is usually on the consumer/producer relation, that is the question of producers taking the welfare of consumers into consideration. In the case of organic food I find it more relevant to focus on the consumer's ethical relation to those he or she buys food for (including themselves). One characteristic of an ethical relation is that it a demand to justify one's actions will be accepted as inherently legitimate - in this case, to justify the decision to buy organic food. And nearly all the discourses I have found can offer good ethical arguments for buying organic food - so this seems to be a good interpretation. But this does not account for the consumer who just likes the taste of organic food or just follows social expectations.

The *taste* for organic food cannot immediately be connected with cultural capital, as Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction would otherwise predict. The interest in organic food is certainly a "commonness" in taste (Schmidt 1993), but could it also be interpreted as distaste for something else? I argue that a distaste for the artificial should be part of the understanding of the consumption of organic food. The argument depends on an understanding of food as something at once cultural and natural. And as food can go bad in a natural way - e.g. rot - then it can also go bad in a cultural way: be too artificial. When food becomes artificial can not be determined in principle - it is only determined in a situation when the distaste sets in. But there are some rules of thumb - e.g. when food is produced in ways which differ too much

from our 'kitchen model' for cooking, it can be seen as artificial. In this context organic food labelling offers a possibility for consumers to act upon their potential distastes.

Discussion

In concluding the thesis I insist not only on the plurality of connotations of organic food, but also that this plurality is to the advantage of all parties: producers, distributors, public authorities, consumers, home cooks, eaters as well as us all as a society. I believe that reducing the number of connotations of organic food would be a disadvantage.

I further suggest calling organic food more *cultivated* food - instead of natural food. By calling it more cultivated, we are reminded that farming is never only natural but always also - cultivation. And we are warned against thinking that less is better when it comes to food technology and organic food. What matter is that it is a cultivated process that respects food culture.