

Project title: “Consumption of organic foods – between market, everydaylife and visions of a sustainable food culture”

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Objective: Consumption of Organic Food

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Summary:

The overall perspective of this dissertation is 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 Wolfgang Sachs and the Wuppertal Institute (2000) have defined it.

Consumption of organic food has been examined 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.

The purpose of throwing light on organics from different perspectives and contexts originates to begin with in the wish to understand the different meanings and experiences attached to organic foods, which have been addressed in my main research question:

How can the organic food consumption develop into a sustainable direction – and which role part can supermarkets, the public caterers and the citizens respectively play?

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 Sköldberg 2000)

The studies conducted interplay with a number of theory based discussions and analyses of sustainable development, ecological modernization and the development tendencies in late modernity (risk issues, disembedding mechanisms, individualisation, institutionalisation and the development of reflexivity) with reference to social scientist as Ulrich Beck (1994, 1996, 1997), Anthony Giddens (1994, 1996, 1999), Arthur Mol (2000, 2002), Sachs m.fl. (2000), Kurt Aaggard Nielsen (1999) and Henrik Kaare Nielsen (2001).

The development within both the food system and the organic sector is encircled by my own research as well as analyses and critical discussions conducted by (Marsden og Harrison 2000, Lang og Heasman 2004, Guthman 2002, 2004, Miele og Murdoch 2004 and others).

Today a widespread belief in the markets ability to take care of the environmental challenges, e.g. through organic consumption, is prevailing. My research reveals a somehow more complex picture. Firstly the development on the food market has lead to still increasing concentrations of power, which impair the voice and position of the consumers, the consumer organisations and other NGO’s and secondly because of the ambivalent dimensions connected to food consumption within an everyday life perspective (Gronow & Warde 2001, Halkier 1999 og 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, all the time that supply, time, habits and financial circumstances etc. are putting restrictions on the consumption of organics. My research furthermore points out that the persons interviewed have serious doubts concerning their influence as consumers. A majority of them 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.

Against the background of the studies and discussions presented in this dissertation, I will in the concluding parts argue that the development of organic consumption ought to rest on a broader perspective. Other kinds of market-places must be developed as a supplement to the ever more dominating supermarkets and retail conglomerates. It is suggested that a significantly more comprehensive and democratically founded strategy of sustainability is established, aiming at the promotion of a sustainable food culture with participation of public sector catering, schools and social movements.

Articles:

- "Hvilke rolle spiller forbrugeren?" (Forskningsnyt for økologisk jordbrug, nr. 3, 2002)
- "Økologi mellem idealer, marked og madkultur" (article for an forthcoming anthology initiated by the consumer council)

Paper presentations:

- "Forbrugerne mellem hverdagsliv, holdninger og idealer" (Nordic workshop, arranged by the consumer council, Copenhagen, 2003)
- "Ecological modernisation in the danish foodsector: a casestudy of the sale and consumption of organic food products in the supermarkets", at the conference "Work leisure and development in rural Europe today", arranged by European Society for Rural Sociology" (Sligo, Ireland, 2003)
- "Ecological modernization of the Danish food sector – the road to sustainable development?", at International sustainable development research conference (Manchester, UK, 2004)
- "Organic production – between conventionalisation and changes in food culture", at International Society of Rural Sociology world congress (Trondheim, Norway 2004)