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Cultivating Carrots and Community: Local Organic Food and Sustainable Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the social implications of sustainable consumption through an empirical study of a local organic food initiative. It sets out an analytical framework based upon Douglas's Cultural Theory to categorise the range of competing value perspectives on sustainable consumption into 'hierarchical', 'individualistic' and 'egalitarian' worldviews, and considers how these various worldviews might each adopt locally-grown organic food as a sustainable consumption initiative. Tensions between the paradigms are evident when attention is turned to a case study of a local organic food producers' cooperative. Research with both producers and consumers reveals that the values embedded in its practice are both partisan and pluralistic, but are principally 'Egalitarian'. Its interactions with policy regimes and social and economic institutions are examined, to illustrate the value conflicts inherent, and understand the barriers it faces in operation and the institutional factors inhibiting the growth of grassroots 'bottom-up' sustainable food initiatives of this kind. In addition to addressing these barriers, the policy implications of these findings for sustainable consumption policy and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Sustainable consumption, organic food, cultural theory, localism, cooperatives

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable production and consumption has risen up the political agenda over the last ten years, to become a core subject within sustainable development policy in the UK. In 2003 the UK government published their strategy for sustainable consumption (DEFRA, 2003b), part of its response to the European Union's commitment to develop a 10-year plan for sustainable consumption. However what precisely sustainable consumption means is a subject of fierce debate, and a range of different policy scenarios exist. The UK government's sustainable consumption agenda of 'greener growth' does not challenge the status quo, and represents a 'technical fix' to the problem of unsustainable consumption, according to some analysts (Seyfang, 2004). It stands in marked contrast to other, more radical critiques of current consumption patterns that incorporate social sustainability and equity, and favour a downscaling of material consumption (rather than continued growth) (Jackson, 2005; Seyfang, 2005). In the food sector, for instance, government policy on food and farming calls for a sustainable approach, founded on dismantling the Common Agricultural Policy subsidy system across Europe and 'reconnecting with the market' (DEFRA, 2002b: 15), marking a shift from top-down hierarchical policymaking to market-oriented institutions. Production and consumption of organic food is supported by government policy, within a context of global trade and policy to strengthen *all* links in the food chain. However, in recent years organically-grown produce for *local* markets has become more popular with consumers, and re-localising food chains has been put forward as a strategy for sustainable consumption due to the apparent benefits to local economies, communities, and environments (Pretty, 2001; Iles, 2005; Saltmarsh, 2004b; Norberg-Hodge et al., 2000; La Trobe, 2002; Jones, 2001; Seyfang, 2006).

How then are we to make sense of the vast array of initiatives and policies that claim to promote 'sustainable consumption'? There is an emerging body of research on sustainable consumption, which focuses on cultural, psychological and sociological models of consumption behaviour in preference to traditional neo-liberal economic models (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; Seyfang 2004; Thompson and Rayner, 1998; Spaargaren, 2003), but the ways in which these theories relate to practical sustainable consumption initiatives is under-researched. This paper aims to fill that knowledge gap, and begin to understand the tensions and value conflicts inherent in developing new institutions for sustainable consumption. It examines the implications of a range of competing perspectives for sustainable consumption policy and practice, presenting the findings of new empirical research with an acclaimed local organic food initiative, and discussing the social implications of sustainable food initiatives.

The paper first sets out an analytical framework to categorise the range of perspectives on sustainable consumption. It goes on to consider how various worldviews might interpret locally-grown organic food as a sustainable consump-

CULTIVATING CARROTS AND COMMUNITY

tion initiative, and illustrates the competing ideologies and values underlying contrasting strategies. It then presents empirical findings from a case study of Eostre Organics, a local organic food producers cooperative in Norfolk, East Anglia, and investigates the values and practices of producers and consumers. The social and political implications of these value conflicts are discussed. The final section discusses the implications of these findings for sustainable consumption policy and practice.

2. CONTESTING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Many social and psychological theories of consumption seek to understand patterns of behaviour using explanatory tools outside the conventional economic paradigm (for an excellent review, see Jackson and Michaelis, 2003). Here an analytical framework derived from Mary Douglas' Cultural Theory is used as an heuristic tool, a method for categorising and unpicking the diverse range of views on sustainable consumption (Douglas and Wildawsky, 1983). Thompson and Rayner (1998) describe three competing paradigms of mutually reinforcing models of social organisation and beliefs about nature, each of which leads to separate diagnoses of the environmental problem, and makes different policy prescriptions (see also Seyfang, 2003; 2004; Thompson and Rayner, 1998). These are: hierarchists, egalitarians and individualists.

Hierarchists see nature as tolerant within limits – equilibrium can be maintained by incorporating environmental principles into management techniques and accounting systems. Such an approach to development requires a social form of stratified collectivity and respect for authority, experts and tradition. Consumption is tightly bound with social status, history and tradition. Sustainable consumption for hierarchists is therefore about consuming what is socially prescribed in a *responsible* manner, respecting traditions and limits, and accepting state regulation to protect these (Meadows et al, 1972).

The second group, *Egalitarians*, see nature as a finite and fragile system – therefore humans must minimise their impacts on the environment's limited and depleting resources. They favour a scaling down of material consumption, or 'voluntary simplicity', in developed countries in order to allow a fair share of resources to developing nations, and seek frugal consumption patterns based on local provisioning. These principles demand a highly collective society, and justice and equity are central concerns for this group, and the appropriate process for collective decision-making is participatory democracy. Sustainable consumption for egalitarians is a matter of consuming *less*, and hence challenging the conventional wisdom that income and consumption equates with wellbeing (Daly, 1992; Schumacher, 1993 [1973])

Individualists view nature as a cornucopian system, responding robustly to human intervention, and therefore justifying an experimental and opportunistic

approach to environmental management. The consumption pattern seen here is conspicuous, hedonistic and cosmopolitan, while the social structure appropriate to this behaviour is individualistic and competitively market-based. Sustainable consumption, in this view, equates to the consumption of sustainably produced goods (or 'greener' economic growth) (OECD, 2002). The UK government's approach to sustainable consumption has much in common with this cultural type. It is founded upon a belief that stable and continued economic growth is compatible with effective environmental protection and responsible use of natural resources. Policies to promote sustainable consumption are referred to as 'market transformation': correcting prices and information gaps in the market and encouraging the individual consumer to take responsibility for driving sustainable consumption through their purchasing decisions (DEFRA, 2003b) – a belief system also known as Ecological Modernisation (Hajer, 1995).

In describing these three cultural types, the aim of this tool is to allow for plural rationalities, values and objectives to be examined side by side, without recourse to claims of objective superiority, rightness, or truth. However, it is a conceptual model of ideal types, rather than a literal description of discrete individuals and institutions. In practice, people's values and organisations' objectives are a blurred picture, shifting between positions according to context and political economic factors. Throughout the article, these types will be referred to as a convenient shorthand for the elaborate worldviews each describes – in other words, as 'egalitarian values' rather than 'egalitarian people'.

3. LOCAL AND ORGANIC FOOD: COMPETING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION RATIONALES

Local organic food has been suggested as a practical means to promote sustainable consumption (Pretty, 2001; Jones, 2001; Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000; La Trobe, 2002; Saltmarsh, 2004b; Seyfang, 2006), for economic, social and environmental reasons, which are here discussed in terms of the analytical framework described above. Organically grown food is produced without the use of artificial chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and where animals are raised in more natural conditions, without the routine use of drugs, antibiotics and wormers common in intensive livestock farming (Soil Association, 2003). Between 1998 and 2003 there was a seven-fold increase in the amount of land certified for and in conversion to organic production, rising to 741,000 hectares (DEFRA, 2003a). The market for organically grown food has also expanded enormously over the last ten years, moving from a minority interest for fringe environmentalists, to a mainstream healthy-eating option adopted by many household-name food brands. The most commonly cited reasons for consuming organic food are: food safety, the environment, animal welfare and taste (Soil Association, 2003). Local food has also become more widely recognised and consumed in recent years. Of course

CULTIVATING CARROTS AND COMMUNITY

scale and what is termed 'local' is a matter of perspective – it may mean from a local country, sub-national region, county, or village, and it is over-simplistic to suppose a binary polarisation between 'global' and 'local' food (Hinrichs, 2003). In this sector, sellers are marketing not only the local distinctiveness of their goods, but also a connection with their provenance and an engagement between consumers and producers which is lacking in the global mass-market. And it is a quality consumers want. Boyle calls this a desire for 'authenticity', for real life, and claims that there is a growing demand for what is authentic, local and trustworthy (Boyle, 2003). A recent poll found that 52% of respondents with a preference want to purchase locally-grown food, and another 46% would prefer it grown in the UK (NEF, 2003).

These are not homogenous categories: there are a variety of supply channels for localised and organic food which have grown rapidly over the last 5-10 years: farmers markets (where goods must be produced within a given radius of the market, and sold by the farmer) are a recent innovation in the UK, and local farm shops are the most visible outlets for these goods. Organic food can be locally grown or imported from overseas (65% of organic produce eaten in the UK is imported); it can be grown on small-scale labour-intensive farms, or mass-produced in industrialised agricultural landscapes, and it can be delivered in boxes direct from the farmer, or bought in supermarkets (which account for 82% of sales) (Soil Association, 2002). The environmental, social and economic implications of each of these modes of consumption are quite different, embodying a range of values and desires. By unpicking these, we can see that local organic food is appetising to each of the three cultural types.

Egalitarians favour organic food that represents a return to small-scale agriculture which is more respectful of the environment, strengthening local economies and building links between consumers and producers, and these values are the closest to those of the founders of the Organics movement, combining social and environmental goals (Smith, 2006). This group is characterised as 'downshifting, localising green' consumers. The environmental rationale of organic production is important – to reduce the impact of agricultural production on local ecosystems – and re-localising food supply chains is a way of cutting 'food miles' (the distance food travels between being produced and being consumed) and so cutting the energy and pollution associated with food transportation (Jones, 2001; Iles, 2005). So long as these environmental costs are externalised, such practices will continue to be economically profitable, despite their negative social impacts on local growers Pretty (2001). Egalitarians also believe that local people should have greater control over how their food is grown, challenging the industrialised and chemical-dependent nature of mass-produced agriculture, and favouring localised food chains. They promote local food because of the social bonds it forges between consumers and local growers, and because it seeks to embed social networks into economic relationships, in direct contrast to the globalised market which excels at divorcing economic transactions from

social and environmental contexts – in other words, protecting local production from the negative impacts of globalisation (Saltmarsh, 2004b; Young, 2004). In this paradigm, the local economy benefits from a higher economic multiplier associated with more localised food supply chains, and this produces a further insulating or adaptive effect to globalisation (Ward and Lewis, 2002).

Local and organic food therefore carries a strong social and ethical community-building function for Egalitarians, re-educating people about where their food comes from, encouraging a rejection of the supermarket supply model, and so offering a high degree of feedback (economic, social and environmental) between producers and consumers (Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000) – in essence, food miles are manifestations of the ‘missing objects’ inherent in a globalised food system which distances producers and consumers (Iles, 2005). There are a range of local food initiatives which seek to achieve these goals, including Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) which is ‘a partnership between farmers and consumers where the responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared’ (Soil Association, 2001:6) in various forms of mutual support, such as local ‘veggie box schemes’ (where a consumer pays a subscription to the farmer, who delivers a box of mixed seasonal vegetables every week). Participation in the mutually-supportive CSA initiatives are motivated more by the values it embodies and the lifestyle it permits – practising egalitarian values – than for the economic benefits (ibid).

The second paradigm in the Cultural Theory model, Individualists, are attracted to organic food because of the supposed health benefits to consumers as individuals of eating such produce, especially for children. For these self-interested hedonistic consumers, claims of superior flavour and nutrition (or enhanced food safety) are most relevant, and the environmental benefits of organic production are generally neglected. Understanding organic food within this type, large scale industrialised organic farms supplying global markets are seen as an efficient industry response to consumer demand, and the aesthetically-appealing organic produce available in supermarkets is preferred to the dirty and inconsistent locally grown alternatives. In this model, consumption patterns remain the same, with the difference that ingredients are organic – for example Heinz organic baked beans, etc. Organic food consumption for individualists is about consuming differently-produced food, rather than changing consumption patterns, and about accruing the benefits personally. Local food supply chains would only be considered relevant to Individualists in a situation where the full production and transport costs of transporting food were internalised and so imported food would become more expensive. Following the logic of this worldview, then, in the present policy climate, the geographical origins of food is irrelevant to this group of consumers.

The third perspective on local organic food as a tool for sustainable consumption is that of the Hierarchists, who see organic food as a status symbol

CULTIVATING CARROTS AND COMMUNITY

– or ‘yuppie chow’, signifying that the consumer has the good sense and discrimination (and wealth) to choose high quality food with a premium price tag. These consumers favour organic produce because of the status it conveys, the association with elite cultures of gastronomy, the conservative values it embodies, and the preservation of local traditions and distinctiveness this brings when food is grown in a traditional way rather than mass-produced and industrialised. Guthman (2003) suggests that organic food’s entry into mainstream culture was associated with this gentrification, and class differentiation. Supporting local food systems can also be a symbolic action towards ‘defensive localism’, representing parochial conservative values, and seeking to exclude ‘others’ (Winter, 2003). Holloway and Kneafsey (2000) find that the farmer’s market is a space for enabling simultaneously ‘alternative’ and ‘reactionary’ consumption, with organic and animal welfare-friendly produce selling alongside conventionally-farmed goods and battery-farmed eggs. Another example of a local food initiative is the Slow Food movement, whose objective is to protect and promote good food – i.e. home-cooking, good quality ingredients, valuing taste and social experience above convenience (as opposed to ‘fast’ food), and to this end has spread across the industrialised countries with 77,000 members organised into 700 local ‘convivia’ in 48 countries. This initiative is deeply rooted in local cultures and in many ways is very conservative, wishing to preserve local agricultural diversity, specialities and traditions, and resist the global uniformity of mass food consumption. This emphasis on history and tradition suggests that the Slow Food movement is representative of the Hierarchical culture which values the status, rank and social positioning afforded by those who can afford – the costs are high in terms of (usually unpaid female labour) time and money – slow food. Interestingly the Slow Food movement is indeed a very hierarchical organisation, with an international headquarters and regional subgroups, within a very formal and rigid structure: ‘The head of the ... convivium is the *fiduciary* or *convivium leader*, who, through the members and the central office, ... In short, he educates in matters of taste’ (Slow Food, 2003). Therefore we can describe this group of consumers as status-conscious, conservative traditionalists, for whom the benefits of consuming local organic food are experienced in strengthening stratified and exclusive social structures.

Thus the consumption of locally grown organic produce can be both a radical alternative to conventional food supply chains that protect the environment, an efficient response to internalisation of full production costs, a health-conscious choice, or a parochial defensive strategy associated with elite status, and Table 1 summarises these positions. The ‘organic sector’ is therefore quite evidently not a homogenous category.

TABLE 1. Competing Sustainable Consumption Rationales for Local and Organic Food

	Individualistic values	Hierarchical values	Egalitarian values
Nature	Robust and benign	Tolerant within limits	Fragile and limited
Social organisation	Market, atomised society, competitive, hedonistic	Top-down authority, stratified society, traditional	Decentralised, participative, social justice, cooperative
Sustainable consumption	Getting prices right, strengthening markets, 'green' economic growth	Managed growth, experts to advise on environmental limits	Reduced consumption, redefining 'wealth' and 'progress'
Why organic?	Good for individual consumers	Good for social order – displays status	Good for the environment
Why local?	Makes economic sense if full costs are internalised	Preserves traditional livelihoods, defensive localism	Cuts food miles, increases self-reliance Embeds the economy in local society and environment

4. EOSTRE ORGANICS: A LOCAL ORGANIC FOOD INITIATIVE

The previous section reviewed a range of competing rationales for promoting local organic food as a tool for sustainable consumption. In order to illustrate these tensions and explore the social implications of sustainable consumption, empirical case study research was carried out with a local organic food supplier, namely Eostre Organics (pronounced 'easter' and named after the Anglo Saxon goddess of regeneration and growth). Eostre are a producer cooperative based in Norfolk, East Anglia, which won the 2003 Local Food Initiative of the Year award in the Soil Association's Organic Food Awards, given to the business or venture considered to have shown most 'innovation and commitment in making good food locally available' (Eostre Organics, 2004a).

The research took place during April and May 2004, and consisted of semi-structured interviews with the organisers; site visits to the organisation's headquarters and box-packing site, as well as their main market stall; document analysis of literature published by and about Eostre; and a self-completed customer survey. Surveys asking customers about their motivations and attitudes to organic and local food were sent to 252 customers of 3 veggie-box schemes which are supplied by Eostre. Of these, 79 were returned, representing a response rate of 31.3%. In addition, all customers of the Norwich market stall were invited to take a survey; 110 did so, and of these 65 were returned (59.1% response rate).

CULTIVATING CARROTS AND COMMUNITY

The origins and development of Eostre Organics: grassroots response to globalisation

Over the last 12 years, farm employment has fallen in the East of England by 20.4% from 66,305 to 52,748 (DEFRA, 2002a). At the same time, demand for local organic produce has grown while supply has been slow to keep up: just 0.8% of agricultural land in the Eastern region of England is organic or in-conversion, compared to 2.8% for England and 4.3% for the UK as a whole (DEFRA, 2003a). With its roots in East Anglia Food Link (a not-for-profit co-operative to promote organic production in the region), Eostre was established in April 2003 with £125,000 of financial support over three years from DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme (Saltmarsh, 2004a). Many of the farmers in the cooperative had previously sold organic produce to supermarkets, and had suffered from a drop in sales and prices during the recession in the early 1990s, as well as having a negative experience of dependency upon a single, distant buyer. This led some growers to seek greater control over their businesses by moving into direct marketing, and an informal inter-trading arrangement developed between a handful of small local organic growers, which formed the core of the cooperative.

Eostre's aim of providing sustainable and stable livelihoods to its member growers is therefore a grassroots response to economic recession and vulnerability caused by a global food market – a local adaptation to globalisation in the food sector. Eostre comprises nine local organic growers – some with very small holdings – and a producer cooperative in Padua, Italy with over 50 members of its own. By organising collectively, Eostre's members achieve the scale necessary to access markets which small growers cannot manage alone, for example being able to supply market stalls all year round and access public sector catering. These farms produce a wide range of seasonal fruit and vegetables, and supplies are supplemented by imports from their Italian partners and other co-operative and fair trade producers. They sell their produce through box schemes, shops, farmers markets, and are supplying to local schools and a hospital.

Eostre's charter states:

Eostre is an organic producer co-operative supplying fresh and processed organic food direct from our members in the East of England and partner producers and co-operatives from the UK and Europe.

Eostre believes that a fair, ecological and co-operative food system is vital for the future of farming, the environment and a healthy society. Direct, open relationships between producers and consumers build bridges between communities in towns, rural areas and other countries, *creating a global network of communities, not a globalised food system of isolated individuals* (Eostre Organics, 2004b, emphasis added).

Its aims include: to supply consumers of all incomes high quality seasonal produce; to encourage co-operative working among its members and between

the co-op and consumers; transparency about food supply chains; to source all produce from UK and European regions from socially responsible producers and co-ops promoting direct local marketing, and from fair trade producers outside Europe; to favour local seasonal produce and supplement (not replace) with imports; to minimise packaging, waste and food transport; to offer educational farm visits to raise awareness of the environmental and social aspects of local organic production (ibid).

Considering these goals, it is clear that in its emphasis on co-operative institutions, minimising environmental impact, and strong local links between community and farmer as a response to globalisation, these values mark Eostre as strongly Egalitarian in its value base, institutions and objectives. These form a coherent vision for sustainable food strongly differentiated from the produce available through conventional channels. Project and Development Manager Dot Bane explains how these values translate to daily practice: ‘we’re working on a very personal level with people ... that is true of consumers as well as producers’. How do their consumers feel about organic and local food?

Consumer motivations and values: building egalitarian communities

The range of values and motivations held by Eostre’s consumers is shown in Table 2. The survey research with Eostre’s consumers finds multiple understandings of the consumption behaviour Eostre promotes, and that motivations for

TABLE 2. Motivations for purchasing local organic food from Eostre

Egalitarian motivations	Ranking	% of customers (n=144)
Better for the environment	1	93.8
To cut packaging waste	2	85.4
To cut food miles	3=	84.0
To know where food has come from and how it was produced	7	75.7
Supporting a co-operative	8	70.1
Keeping money in the local economy	9	65.3
More diversity of produce varieties	11	33.3
Hierarchical motivations		
Supporting local farmers	3=	84.0
Preserves local traditions and heritage	10	36.1
Enjoy face-to-face contact with growers	12	25.0
Demonstrates good taste and refinement	13	8.3
Individualistic motivations		
Organic food is more nutritious / tastes better	5	79.9
Organic food is safer	6	77.1

Source: author’s survey of Eostre customers

CULTIVATING CARROTS AND COMMUNITY

consuming local organic food include social, economic, ethical, personal, and environmental reasons. The most commonly given reason (cited by 93.8% of respondents) was that local and organic food was better for the environment – an Egalitarian motivation. For example, one respondent replied '[buying local organic food] is important because we believe in sustainability regarding our environment, and we are committed to reducing our 'eco-footprint' in any areas we can', and another stated 'I feel I owe it to the Earth', while another explained 'I am very concerned about the effects of pesticides and pollution on us and the environment', and another was motivated by the fact that 'organic farming is better for wildlife'. Dot Bane explains 'People are becoming very eco-aware, and one of the biggest issues in any ecological awareness has got to be food miles'.

The next three most popular responses somewhat overlapped with this first motivation, with an emphasis on localisation and avoidance of supermarkets and global supply chains, again with an emphasis towards the Egalitarian cultural bias. These are: cutting packaging waste (85.4%), cutting food miles (84.0%) and supporting local farmers (84.0%), which is here classed as pertaining to the Hierarchical culture. Typical responses included: 'If good, tasty food is available locally, it seems pointless to buy potentially inferior goods from a supermarket which have often been imported from across the globe', 'I like the idea of England being more self-sufficient and using our own good land to feed us all simply', 'It cuts out the environmentally-destructive chain of transport from one end of the world to another', 'I would like to see a return to seasonal fruit and veg, which we can only hope for if we support the smaller/local farms', and 'I value the fact that some of it is grown in Norfolk by small businesses whose owner and workers obviously care about the land, their customers and their social surroundings'.

Other popular responses concerned the personal benefits achieved through consumption of organic food, categorised as Individualistic motivations. The superior nutritious qualities and taste of organics were cited by 79.9% of respondents, and 77.1% felt organic food was safer than conventionally produced food. Supporting quotations include: 'I do not want to eat herbicides, pesticides, GM food etc', 'the environment we live in is so polluted I feel the need to protect myself by consuming organic food', and 'I want to stay healthy as long as possible and you are what you eat, so I try and eat the best'. Most of the remaining responses were in the Egalitarian category, covering a desire to know more about the source of food and how it was produced (75.7% of respondents), supporting a co-operative (70.1%) and keeping money in the local economy (65.3%).

So, while some of these responses could apply to more than one cultural model, the Cultural Theory framework allows us to see that there are nevertheless plural rationalities at work, interpreting the consumption of local organic food according to different value systems. Furthermore, what we have called the Egalitarian set of motivations (reducing environmental impact, promoting

localised food economies) is most keenly held by Eostre's customers, followed by Individualistic concerns with personal health and safety, and thirdly a Hierarchical desire for traditional practices. Identifying popular support for these different sets of values is crucial, as is the opportunity to practise non-mainstream principles and beliefs, and the community of vision which Eostre has helped to build. Sustainable consumption initiatives emerging from the grassroots, as Eostre has done, represent an upsurge of action for sustainable food, though their definition of 'sustainable food' might differ from that employed by mainstream policy which is biased towards Individualistic values and institutions.

Initiatives such as Eostre provide an outlet for consumers to enact their non-mainstream, or Egalitarian values, to identify with particular regimes of environmental governance, and to join forces with like-minded people, in building an alternative to globalised, mainstream food supply chains (Seyfang, 2006). One respondent stated 'I trust that the people involved with Eostre have similar values [to me] regarding organics, the environment, GMOs and no exploitation of cheap/forced labour', and another remarked 'I feel that "connectedness" is important and that modern industrial food provision has led to further "rationalisation" of nature in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first'. This sense of community is echoed by another respondent who favours local organic food because 'purchasing it links me with a part of the community which operates in a far healthier and more ethical way than the wider economic community', and another felt that 'organic food helps bring back small community living instead of alienated individuals feeling unconnected'.

The personal relationships built up between farmers and consumers strengthen local economic and community links and a sense of connection to the land, while cooperative institutions allow small actors access to markets normally denied to all except the industrialised agricultural sector. As one respondent explained, the appeal of Eostre was 'the sense of communal participation, starting from the feeling that we all know – or potentially know – each other, and continuing on through wider issues, both social and environmental', and another stated 'I know the growers and the sales/admin staff. This inspires trust', while another reported that they liked Eostre because 'it's a cooperative; they are like-minded people', and another identified with the cooperative ethos, stating 'I like that local organic farmers work together rather than competing against each other for profit', while another commented 'It's an altogether more satisfying way of shopping because you feel that everyone is benefiting – the producer, the environment, [and] the consumer'.

Local organic food organisations are builders of community and shared vision, and the Eostre market stall in Norwich is a good example of how this works: it is a convenient city-centre meeting point and source of information, open to everyone. The stall is decorated with leaflets and posters advertising a range of sustainable food and other environmental initiatives, for example anti-GM meetings, Green Party posters, alternative healthcare practices, wildlife

CULTIVATING CARROTS AND COMMUNITY

conservation campaigns etc. This correctly reflects the interests of customers: 60.0% of respondents identified the Greens as the political party which best represented their views, compared with 20.0% for Labour, 17.8% for the Liberal Democrats and just 4.4% for the Conservatives (the total exceeds 100% because some respondents gave multiple responses).

There is a sense of the food stall being a vehicle for introducing consumers to wider debates about food and sustainability, and a meeting place for like-minded individuals seeking to carve out a niche space in which to act. How government and society as a whole respond to that niche is crucial for the success or failure of sustainable food initiatives such as Eostre.

5. DISCUSSION: VALUES, INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIETY

The empirical findings of this case study demonstrate the strongly Egalitarian values held by the cooperative and its consumers. How does Eostre – and these values – interface with the rest of society? In this discussion, two principal areas of value conflict are examined: first the relationships between Eostre and supermarkets as a source of organic food provision, and secondly the sources of obstacles faced by Eostre which prevent it from achieving its greater potential.

When questioned about the relative merits of supermarkets and Eostre, as a source of organic food, consumers made a strong statement that purchasing from a supermarket was not equivalent to buying from Eostre, as it meant losing some of the qualities they cherished – and the most important of these was localism. Organic food sold in supermarkets is more likely to have been imported, and as Dot Bane remarked: ‘whatever benefits people gain from it being organic, they lose from the food miles it takes to get it here’. Consumers felt that organic supermarket food had been co-opted and the social critique which accompanied the sustainable consumption initiative had been lost, prompting them to support Eostre despite any drawbacks it presented. One respondent remarked ‘I think supermarkets are distancing people from the origins of food, and harming local economies. I try to use supermarkets as little as possible’, and another felt that Eostre ‘feels more trustworthy than a supermarket.’ However, not all Eostre’s customers were so keen to avoid the supermarket aisles, as over three quarters of the survey respondents reported that they also bought organic food from supermarkets. Given that consumers’ motivations included those that we have termed Individualist, it is conceivable that supermarkets might capture Eostre’s market share (or indeed, prevent it from expanding to a broader customer base) if they provide fresh organic or local produce that is cheaper or more convenient.

A critical analysis suggests that the values espoused by Egalitarians and the social institutions they favour are threatened by the long-standing domination of the Individualistic market culture, which dismisses environmental concern with the status quo. This threat can be seen in the ways that the dominant In-

dividualist culture appropriates initiatives which initially arise as challenges, whether from Hierarchist or Egalitarian cultures. The shifting place of organic food from eco-crank's hobby horse (or hierarchist's status symbol of good taste) to wide scale public acceptability reflects an interesting metamorphosis from organic food being seen as good for the environment and society (bypassing global production, conventional growing techniques and pesticide use), to being good for individuals (where the health benefits are emphasised). Using the cultural theory map we can see that this represents a move from the Egalitarian to the Individualist paradigm, from challenging existing consumption patterns to merely changing some of the technical details thereof, and from a radical critique of modern food production to a mainstream marketing technique. In this case we can see that the mainstream has superficially adopted the niche consumption market for organic food, but has done so in a way which keeps the technical point (not using pesticides or fertilisers in growing) but discards the essence of the project – namely to promote a different relationship between people and food and build alternative provisioning systems. Smith (2006) interprets the plurality of values and rationales within the organic movement as the evolution of 'alternative niches' from hierarchical and egalitarian origins, through a process of influencing and penetrating the mainstream, to mass-market individualistic strategies. At the same time as this mainstream adoption is occurring, the niche 'splinters' to retain an alternative, radical egalitarian niche alongside the mainstream version of organic food – represented by the small-scale community-oriented producer – which can continue to provide an alternative, innovative model of food system governance.

Turning to the second major issue of value conflict, examining the barriers to success faced by Eostre – particularly the external ones – illustrates the ways in which policy regimes and social institutions limit the scope of alternative systems of provisioning to provide sustainable consumption opportunities. Social innovation for sustainable consumption which comes from the egalitarian perspective challenges the dominant cultures of market and hierarchical institutions seen in the scientific community, conventional problem-framing, and government policy. Smith (2006) argues that social and economic niches for alternative technologies and consumption patterns can be carved out, and provide valuable pioneering examples which the mainstream may learn from and potentially adopt in the future. But they are hampered by higher levels of decision-making, in terms of funding and practical support, but also in terms of the general social acceptability of such projects. Michaelis (2000) observes that while governments generally assume that a shift to sustainable consumption will involve coercion and punitive measures from a government which the public distrusts, in fact this overlooks the fact that many people are keen to experiment with alternative (egalitarian) low-consumption lifestyles. They find little support within social institutions or social norms, and require an immediate community of people sharing their values, in order to consolidate and

CULTIVATING CARROTS AND COMMUNITY

reproduce a practical lifestyle, and to provide status and recognition according to different values to the mainstream.

The case study presented here supports these views. The research highlighted two examples of barriers to success faced by the initiative which relate to social acceptability: first, convincing farmers of the benefits of a cooperative form of organisation; and second, raising environmental awareness in society generally, to overcome prejudice against organic food as being too 'alternative'. It also identified a further three obstacles which concern public policy: first the need for wider financial support for small social enterprises such as Eostre; second the need for government directives to overcome local intransigence and force the public sector to adopt local organic food in its catering; and third the lack of pricing of environmental assets which currently gives an indirect subsidy to farming practices which inflict costs on society and the environment.

6: CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This paper has investigated a local organic food initiative as a case study of sustainable consumption. It has found local organic food to represent a wide range of competing objectives and values for consumers, which have been categorised into three paradigms: as a tool for creating green localised economies, as health-conscious global food for supermarket shoppers, and as reactionary fare for status-driven traditionalists. This categorisation – while undoubtedly crude – has been useful in identifying underlying values and the ways in which they complement or compete with each other, resulting in inconsistent policies for sustainable consumption, and situations where sustainable consumption strategies are supported by some policy regimes and social institutions and blocked by others.

If, as this research suggests, consumers hold multiple understandings of what sustainable food might mean, then policy makers should attend closely to those flexible interpretations when designing policy for sustainable consumption. For example, if government wishes to encourage greater consumption of organic food, it should consider the widely disparate motivations of consumers to consume such produce. Holders of Egalitarian values, for example, are unlikely to be impressed by global trade in organic produce at the expense of local suppliers, while they would be more likely to support local production. Those with Hierarchical values might be swayed by appeals to good taste, traditional production methods and rurality, while those who share Individualistic views might respond best to marketing which focuses on the health benefits of organic food. Incentives and policies could be designed to target each different group in society.

Given this plurality of approaches to sustainable consumption, it is important to recognise that at present, policy regimes and social institutions favour those

within what we have called Individualistic cultures, at the expense of other paradigms. There are issues of power and institutional domination to address, and challenges to be made to vested interests and the status quo in this conflictual policy space. The case study has shown the threat of Individualistic cultures (in this case, supermarket provision of organic produce) systematically squeezing out alternatives and restricting the choices available to consumers. Ironically, while championing consumer choice, these institutions collude to undermine and prevent access to choices outside the model of a market-led consumer solution to environmental problems (Levett et al., 2003; Maniates, 2003).

Yet Eostre Organics, an Egalitarian initiative supported by consumers specifically because of its particular values and institutions, demonstrates widespread support for such marginalised cultures, and for integrating social and environmental values into business. The lessons for policy makers from this research are clear. Local organic food initiatives such as Eostre provide a welcome supply of sustainable food for their consumers, but their efforts and impacts could be manifold if policy regimes and social institutions adapted to allow them to thrive. The policy measures recommended are: first, to create a truly 'level playing field' between organic and conventionally produced food, and between local and imported produce, by pricing the environmental and social costs and benefits of food production and transport. This would remove hidden environmental subsidies from artificially cheap imported produce and set the prices right for the food market. Second, public policy and public procurement are presently an enormous wasted opportunity to promote sustainable food. Requiring schools, prisons and hospitals to source food locally and organic if possible would boost demand and create stable outlets for local food initiatives. Finally, increasing financial support for local farmers to form cooperative organisations such as Eostre would build a strong, adaptable local food sector providing sustainable rural livelihoods. Given the right kind of policy support, local organic food initiatives like Eostre Organics could play a major role in developing a sustainable food sector in the UK.

Policy makers need to recognise that such initiatives have an important role to play and could be a potentially powerful driving force in the transition to sustainable development – if they are able to grow and develop on their own terms, rather than being incorporated and appropriated by mainstream provision channels. Taking this view, governments would achieve more significant shifts towards sustainable consumption by supporting and making space for enthusiastic grassroots groups and enterprises, rather than through a top-down punitive approach. The state needs to intervene to actively create alternative structures for provisioning, and social and economic institutions which build on Egalitarian values and offer a 'bottom-up' contribution to sustainable consumption.

CULTIVATING CARROTS AND COMMUNITY

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