LOCAL ORGANIC FOOD: THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

By

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The Social Implications of Sustainable Consumption

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Abstract

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. Notions of 'sustainable consumption' are contested, however, and can represent competing ideologies and perspectives about the environment and society. In order to examine the social implications of sustainable consumption, this paper sets out an analytical framework based upon Cultural Theory to typologise and categorise the range of perspectives on sustainable consumption into 'hierarchical', 'individualistic' and 'egalitarian' worldviews. It goes on to consider how these various worldviews might promote locally-grown organic food as a sustainable consumption initiative, and illustrates the social implications of each model and the tensions between them. These tensions are evident when attention is turned to a case study of Eostre Organics, a local organic food producers cooperative in Norfolk, East Anglia. Research with both Eostre's producers and consumers reveals that the values embedded in its practice are both partisan and pluralistic. Identifying Eostre as an 'egalitarian' endeavour, its interactions with policy regimes and social and economic institutions are examined, in order to understand the barriers it faces in operation and the institutional factors inhibiting the growth of sustainable food initiatives of this kind. These include public acceptability, externalisation of environmental costs associated with conventional produce, and a public sector which does not do enough to actively promote the use of locally sourced food. In addition to addressing these barriers, the implications of these findings for sustainable consumption policy and practice are that governments should recognise the contribution made by 'egalitarian' initiatives, and create policy space to let these grassroots projects thrive and develop 'bottom-up' responses to sustainable consumption.

Keywords: local food, organics, sustainable consumption, localisation, institutions

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, part of its response to the European Union's commitment to develop a 10-year plan for sustainable consumption, which was made at the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development. However what precisely sustainable consumption means is a subject of fierce debate, and a range of different policy scenarios exist. The UK government-mandated 'greener growth' perspective of sustainable consumption does little to challenge the status quo, and represents an environmental 'technical fix' to the problem of unsustainable consumption. 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). Such alternative perspectives are commonly found among grassroots community groups and activists, but their views are rarely translated into policy because they challenge existing policy regimes and values (Seyfang, 2004b).

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 economistic models (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; Seyfang 2004a), 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 new empirical research with an acclaimed local organic food initiative.

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) – clearly marking a shift from top-down hierarchical policymaking to market-oriented institutions. Among a raft of measures for promoting sustainable farming and food, the government has pledged to support organic farming by: promoting organic food in schools and hospitals, providing cash for organic farmers to help them transfer to the new farming system, recognising and valuing the social and economic benefits of organic farming, as well as environmental gains, and promoting local food and for supermarkets to source more organic food from the UK (DEFRA, 2002b). 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 this fails to address localised food supply chains and with this neglect, the more local-oriented, small scale production may be sidelined in this mainstreaming of organics.

Despite this lack of policy support, 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; Saltmarsh, 2004b; Norberg-Hodge, 2000; La Trobe, 2002; Jones, 2001). However there has been very little empirical research to examine the social implications of sustainable food initiatives, and this paper aims to fill that knowledge gap. The paper first sets out an analytical framework to typologise and categorise the range of perspectives on sustainable consumption. It goes on to consider how various worldviews might promote locally-grown organic food as an initiative to promote sustainable consumption, and illustrates the competing ideologies and beliefs underlying contrasting strategies, and the social implications of each. These tensions are evident when attention is turned to a case study of Eostre Organics, a local organic food producers cooperative in Norfolk, East Anglia. Research with both producers and consumers of Eostre's produce reveals that the values embedded in its

practice are both partisan and pluralistic. 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 I use an analytical framework derived from Mary Douglas' Cultural Theory as an heuristic tool, a method for categorising and unpicking the diverse range of views on sustainable consumption (Douglas and Wildavsky, 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; 2004a). 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 ascribed 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) (OCED, 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 untenable 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

Having described the conceptual framework within which the paper examines sustainable consumption, attention now turns to the ways in which organically-grown produce for the local market responds to the varying demands of these competing positions. 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), for economic, social and environmental reasons, which are here discussed in terms of the analytical framework described above.

Organically grown food is produce which is grown 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. The Soil Association is the largest UK organisation which certifies growers which adhere to these standards, providing a robust and recognisable consumer label (Soil Association, 2003). Since the late 1990s, there has been an enormous increase in the amount of land certified for and in conversion to organic production, rising from under 100,000 hectares in 1998 to 741,000 hectares in 2003 (DEFRA, 2003b). This growth looks likely to continue as the government has recently announced a special Organic strand of the Entry Level Scheme to encourage wildlife on farms, to pay organic farmers £60 per hectare rather than £30 for non-organic land (Soil Association, 2004).

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). With such a spread of motivations for consuming organic food, clearly organic food is not a one-dimensional commodity, it comes in different forms and through various channels. It 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 local wholefood shops, or in sanitised supermarkets (which are increasing their domination of the market, with 82% of sales) (Soil Association, 2002).

Local food has become more widely recognised and consumed in recent years, for a variety of reasons which we will unpick using the Cultural Theory analytical model. Of course scale and what is termed 'local' is socially constructed – 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 a recent survey, nearly two thirds (63%) of consumers consider 'local' to mean within a radius of 30 miles, or the county of residence (IGD, 2003). While these definitions, when used flexibly, are useful, perhaps a more useful concept to use is that of localisation: of favouring food grown as locally as possible – and this will vary according to the product.

There are a variety of distribution channels for localised 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. 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 wholly 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). 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. The benefits of local organic food, to this group of 'downshifting, localising green' consumers, is felt by local communities, the environment, and the local economy. The environmental rationale of organic production is important – to reduce the impact of agricultural production on local ecosystems. For environmentalists, re-localising food supply chains is a way of reducing 'food miles' – the distance food travels between being produced and being consumed –and so cutting the energy and pollution associated with transporting food around the world. For example, in one calculation, the ingredients of a traditional British Sunday meal were found to have travelled 81,000km (or twice around the Earth) and their transport was responsible for emitting at least 37kg of carbon dioxide. If the same produce had been grown and eaten within a 45km radius, the carbon dioxide emissions related to their transport would be just 0.2% of the globally-transported meal (Jones, 2001). 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) calculates the cost of environmental subsidies to the food industry, and compares the 'real cost' of local organic food with globally imported conventionally produced food He finds that environmental externalities add 3.0% to the cost of local-organic food, and 16.3% to the cost of conventional-global food.

The social and economic aspects of local food production are vital here too, including beliefs 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. Egalitarians promote local food because of the social bonds it forges between consumers and local growers, and because it seeks to embed social networks like these into economic relationships, in direct contrast to the globalised market which excels at divorcing economic transactions from social and environmental contexts. A study of food supply chains in Norfolk found that the motivations for many growers to sell locally included "taking more control of their market and [becoming] less dependent on large customers and open to the risk of sudden loss of business" (Saltmarsh, 2004b: ch3) – in other words, protecting local production from the negative impacts of globalisation. This dependency is clearly demonstrated in Europe, where Lang (cited in Young, 2004) shows that 110 large buyers are the gatekeepers between 3.2 million farmers and 250 million consumers. The results of this monopsonistic market are that growers face constant insecurity over sales, the likelihood of being dropped in favour of cheaper imported produce, are forced to suffer late payments, are unable to sell gluts, and high volumes of wastage due to appearance standards unrelated to the quality of the produce etc.

The local economy benefits too, from a higher economic multiplier associated with more localised food supply chains, and this produces a further insulating or adaptive effect to globalisation. For example, one study found that £10 spent on a veggie box scheme circulated two and a half times locally and was worth £25 in the local economy. This compares to £10 spent in a supermarket which leaves the area quite quickly, resulting in a multiplier of just 1.4, meaning it was worth £14 to the local economy (Ward and Lewis, 2002). Local food therefore carries a strong social and ethical community-building function, re-educating people about where their food comes from, encouraging a rejection of the faceless supermarket, and so offering a high degree of feedback (economic, social and environmental) between producers and consumers (Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000). There are a range of local food initiatives which

seek to achieve these goals. They are generally grassroots initiatives, springing up in locally distinct forms to respond to local conditions. They include 'grow your own' schemes promoting allotments and garden growing, particularly in urban environments; farm gate shops; farmers markets; 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, from local 'veggie box schemes' (where a consumer pays a subscription to the farmer, who delivers a box of mixed seasonal vegetables every week) to volunteers working on the farms themselves; etc. 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 (Soil Association, 2001).

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. Large scale industrialised organic farms supplying global markets are seen as an efficient industry response to consumer demand, and the cosmetically-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. In the present policy climate, therefore, 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 – 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, founded in 1986 and based in the Piedmont region of Italy. Its objective is to protect and promote good food, eaten in the traditional Italian family-style – ie home-cooking, good quality ingredients, valuing taste and social experience above convenience (hence the title 'slow' food as opposed to 'fast' food), and to this end has spread across the industrialised countries with 77,000 members organised into 700 local 'convivias' 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 (see Seyfang, 2003 for a discussion of competing rationalities for other sustainable food initiatives including fair trade and ethical trade).

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. THINK GLOBAL, SHOP LOCAL: A CASE STUDY OF EOSTRE ORGANICS

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, comprising nine local organic growers and a producer cooperative in Padua, Italy with over 50 members of its own. They sell their produce through box schemes, shops, farmers markets, and are supplying to local schools and a hospital. Eostre follow a localisation policy, only sourcing from outside the region when local produce is unavailable. In 2003 Eostre Organics won the 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). Market stall staff reported that while not every customer took a survey during the two week period when they were available, most of their regular customers had done so. The high response rate doubtless reflects the fact that customers chose to take a survey, and so the population sampled is doubtless biased towards those with greater interest in Eostre and food supply issues. Although there is some overlap between the two categories (box scheme customers use the stall to top up their supplies), responses will only be considered separately where appropriate.

4.1 The Origins and Development of Eostre Organics: Grassroots Response to Globalisation

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 the usual list of complaints – late payment, insecure sales, high wastage of produce on aesthetic grounds. This negative experience of dependency upon a single, distant buyer 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, to serve local markets more effectively through box delivery schemes, farm gate shops and farmers markets.

Around the same time, Farmers Link, a local NGO, attended the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and was inspired to improve the sustainability of farming in developed countries – in particular the region of East Anglia in the UK. In 1997 Farmers Link established East Anglia Food Link (EAFL)as a not-for-profit co-operative to promote organic production in the region, and over time EAFL's vision crystallised into one of localism – that building direct links between farmers and consumers would create more sustainable food supply chains and benefit local economies and communities (EAFL, 2004).

EAFL's then co-ordinator, Clive Peckham, developed networks between local organic growers and European co-operatives, supply networks and community groups, and demonstrated the benefits of co-operative working to key local farmers such as Grahame Hughes (now Eostre's Operations Manager) and Paul Robinson (Eostre's chair). Inspired by the example of the El Tamiso co-operative in Padua, Italy, and other European alternative food supply chains, these farmers decided to formalise their existing network into a producer co-operative to complement existing businesses and develop new markets. EAFL initially helped to establish Eostre, but soon stepped back to allow its members to run the development of the business. In April 2003 Eostre was established with £125,000 of financial support over three years from DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme (Saltmarsh, 2004a). 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.

4.2 Eostre Organics' Members: Providing Sustainable Livelihoods

Over the last 12 years, farm employment has fallen in the East of England by 20.4% from 66,305 to 52,748. This compares to a decline of 14.7% for the whole of the UK (DEFRA, 2002a). Securing sustainable livelihoods and business viability for small organic growers is

therefore a key objective of Eostre, which has been achieved: for example joining the co-operative has meant that small growers such as one with a smallholding of less than 1 hectare, has found a stable outlet, and has been supported in developing new markets through box schemes and market stalls, while another who was struggling as a conventional fenland farmer, now has greater livelihood security as an organic producer within Eostre (Saltmarsh, 2004a).

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). Dot Bane describes the growth in organic production in the region as significant – stating that twenty years ago, there would not have been enough organic farmers in the region to form a cooperative, whereas now it is a successful business strategy and there is more scope for expanding supply among existing and new growers to meet the surge in demand for local organic produce. 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". Eostre claims to be in a better position than supermarkets to meet that demand, because it works with a number of small scale, dissipated growers, and can get food to point of sale within 24-48 hours "because it's local produce, as far as possible - we only use imported produce to complement our own not instead of, but we do use it".

The average farm size of Eostre's members is 117.3 ha, though most are much smaller than this: the median farm size is 24.3 ha, and so a significant number are very small in comparison with the agricultural sector in the region, where the average holding is 73.9 ha (DEFRA, 2002a). However, 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 El Tamiso and other co-operative and fair trade producers.

Eostre's members supply their produce through a variety of channels throughout East Anglia and London: between them they cover 13 box schemes, 15 market stalls (mostly these are monthly farmers markets, but there is also a full-time market stall on the general provisions market in Norwich city centre, and weekly stalls in several market towns around Norfolk), and they also sell through 12 shops and 9 cafés, pubs or restaurants. Furthermore, Eostre has made inroads into public sector catering by supplying the Norfolk and Norwich hospital staff and visitors canteen, and local schools. Eostre has been very successful so far – in its first 12 months of operation, sales have grown by 70%, and the market stall on Norwich provisions market (believed to be the only full time, wholly organic market stall in the UK) has doubled in size, and has provided access to fresh organic produce to new groups of consumers as well as dedicated organic customers.

Having described the origins and development of Eostre, and the nature of its activities, attention turns to examining its character, value base and the motivations of its consumers. These will be discussed using the Cultural Theory framework to illuminate the implications of this value base for consumers and producers seeking sustainability.

4.3 Eostre's Character and Value Base: Fair, Ecological and Just Food Systems

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?

4.4 Consumer Motivations and Values: Building Egalitarian Communities

Table 2 shows how widely held are particular motivations for consuming from Eostre. The survey research with Eostre's consumers finds multiple understandings of the consumption behaviour Eostre promotes, and that motivations for 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".

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 is 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%).

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

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 the opportunity to practice 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. 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 20th century and into the 21st". 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 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.

4.5 Appropriation and Mainstreaming: Taming the Radical Challenge

It might appear that organic food has already become widely accepted by society, as its presence in every supermarket testifies to its commercial success and consumer appeal. Yet as we have discussed previously, the value set and supply chains employed in these distribution channels are quite different to those used by organisations like Eostre – indeed Eostre was set up to provide a more sustainable alternative to supermarket organic provision. How are local organic food initiatives like this affected by competition from supermarkets?

Eostre's market stall customers felt that the principal drawbacks of sourcing organic food through Eostre compared to supermarkets were related to convenience and accessibility (56.0% of stall customer respondents cited this problem). This included limited opening hours (the stall is open from 9am till 5pm, 6 days a week), and the difficulty of carrying heavy shopping bags back from the city centre. Higher prices was the second-most often reported disadvantage of Eostre over supermarkets (26.0%), followed by poorer quality of produce (20.0%). In contrast, box scheme customers felt that the limited choice and inability to select produce was the biggest drawback compared to using a supermarket (50.0% gave this response) although many said that they personally did not find it a problem. Price was again the second-most cited disadvantage (20.0%), followed by an acknowledgement that the range of produce available was more limited than a supermarket would offer (10.0%).

However, despite these drawbacks, many of Eostre's customers felt very strongly that buying organic food from Eostre presented a range of specific advantages over supermarkets. For stall customers, the main ones are: supporting local businesses (50.8% of respondents); ethical consumerism and avoiding supermarkets on principle (38.1%); reduced packaging waste (34.9%) and cutting food miles (22.2%). For box scheme customers, the principal factors are: again, supporting local businesses (54.1%); better quality produce (41.9%); convenience (31.1%); and cutting packaging (29.7%). So consumers are making 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". Ironically, this very criticism was made of Eostre by 14.4% of survey respondents who would prefer more local supplies: one customer remarked "Sometimes there seems to be a lack of local produce, and I still think Eostre runs up quite a few 'food miles'. What about stocking e.g. Norfolk asparagus or strawberries?".

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 the 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", while another stated "This is shopping as it used to be – supporting local growers, friendly and personal service, food that tastes so good, proving that the modern obsession with supermarkets is not the only way".

However, not all Eostre's customers were so keen to avoid the supermarket aisles, as over three quarters of the survey respondents (77.7%) 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 Individualist 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. Smith (2002) talks of the possibilities of 'niche technologies' for sustainable consumption (representing Egalitarian values) being innovations which can transform the mainstream. However 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.

Supermarkets offering organic and local produce may capture some of the consumer market for these goods, while removing support for other aspects of their production which are held equally valuable by consumers. The cultural theory map allows us to identify these shifts, but what do they mean? Here it is argued that they illustrate the mainstream's adoption and taming of alternatives to conventional consumption patterns, denaturing them in the process, while still claiming 'sustainability'. To favour such a development strategy would be short-sighted and socially undermining, as it attracts customers with convenience and low price, but does not respond to the need for community-building, personal interactions between farmer and consumer, and for strengthening local economies and livelihoods against the negative impacts of globalisation.

4.6 Obstacles Encountered by Eostre: Interactions with Social Institutions and Power

From such a perspective, it is possible to conceive of ways in which marginalised cultures and institutions may fight back and develop in opposition to the mainstream. Identifying 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 (2002) 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 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 with two examples of internal and external barriers to success faced by the initiative which relate to social acceptability, and a further two which concern public policy. First, during Eostre's setting up phase, the principal internal difficulty was persuading local farmers that establishing a formal co-operative structure was worthwhile. This problem was overcome by directly showing farmers positive examples of the arrangement working in other countries and the benefits it could bring. As producer co-operatives become more widespread in the UK, and examples of best practice are disseminated, this need for demonstration and inspiration should be more easily met. External needs were mainly financial, related to setting up a new business and developing new markets, and these were met by a DEFRA grant. Second, Eostre's organisers argue that public awareness of environmental issues and food sustainability in particular needed to be more widely raised. Development manager Dot Bane felt that some people in the schools and

hospital they deal with were reluctant to take on the issue of local food because "organics is still seen as 'alternative' to a lot of people" in positions of power in these institutions. A suggested measure to tackle this would be support community groups and businesses with social and environmental objectives on a broad basis, to generally raise awareness of food issues and encourage greater take-up of local organic produce.

Third, the policy environment for public sector procurement and catering is a further external barrier to successful operation. Although Eostre supplies to a hospital and local schools, this is on a very small scale, and this part of the business could only grow if they were supplying to a cluster of local schools, or if the hospital fed its patients - prospects for scaling-up are bleak within the current policy regimes. For example, the government currently advises schools to consider alternative food suppliers, but Eostre's organisers feel that organic local food will not get into schools on any large scale until there are government directives instructing that schools must use organic local produce, and that the existing supply chains have been in place for so long, there is currently no incentive to change it. Public sector catering could be an enormous market for local organic produce, and as Fiona Adshead, Deputy Chief Medical Officer in the Department of Health attests: "The NHS serves over 300 million meals a year to staff, patients and visitors. The opportunity to impact on health and to give the right messages about sustainable food is enormous" (cited in Sustainable Development Commission, 2004) but only if public policy began to reflect these priorities and insist on building them into its infrastructure Morgan and Morley, 2002). In this case, that is meant quite literally, as the hospital in question – only opened in 2001 – does not even have a kitchen to feed its patients, buying in all its meals from an outside caterer.

Finally, the fourth external barrier to Eostre's success is an external institutional factor which operates at the most fundamental level of economic and social policy-making: the pricing of environmental assets. Comparing the prices of fresh produce on the Eostre stall with that on neighbouring market stalls, it was striking that much of the conventional produce was also locally grown, and that the premium for organic food ranged from 18% to 93% - for example locally grown leeks were prices £1.60/kg for conventional produce, and £1.90/kg for organic; while a standard UK cauliflower cost 80p, an organic one cost £1.27; and celery from Spain cost 75p on a conventional produce stall, and £1.45 from Eostre. The reason for this is simple: the full environmental and social costs of conventional produce are externalised and not accounted for, with the result that it is artificially cheap. Whereas conventional production receives large subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy encouraging further intensification and industrialisation of production, organic produce from small farms uses more labour, and lacks the scale economies captured by large intensive agriculture. This results in higher prices for the consumer, which limits the market for such produce. Well over half of Eostre's customers (58.1%) said that the relatively high price of local / organic / fair trade produce deterred them from buying more of such items.

5. 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 policymakers 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 policymakers 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.

Policymakers should recognise that such initiatives have an important role to play and could be a potentially powerful driving force for 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.

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