

*Unpacking 'Good Food': Towards Understanding
the Semantics of Organics*

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Our project tests a long-standing contention that organic agriculture is somehow 'good' for community. For some, organic farming suggests small-scale non-intensive production with strong linkages to local food consumers through direct marketing. However, the revealed diversity of the so-called 'conventional' sector, and the importance of this diversity for understanding linkages and interdependencies between farm, food, and community, suggests the value of a similar exploration in organic farming. Within sector differences are implicated in different relations between organic farms and rural settlements. A differentiated view of organics helps to explore linkages and to interpret its social importance. One aspect of social importance is the variously defined and unevenly understood notion of 'good food.' As the organic food industry matures and diversifies, there is an appetite for more precise definitions of organics and a clearer understanding of how consumers associate organic production with notions of goodness and quality. By unpacking its various meanings we observe how 'good food' gets bundled into a 'local food systems' package, wherein organic is good, family-scale farming is good, local is good, natural is good, and community is good. Understanding the diversity of organics is an important step to understanding the contributions of organics to rural sustainability.



Introduction

In both research design and popular perception, there has been a tendency to perpetuate certain stereotypes concerning choices made by producers and consumers in both the organics and conventional farm markets. However, the revealed diversity of the agricultural industry, and the importance of this diversity for understanding linkages and interdependencies between farm and town, farm and ecosystem, farm and communal relations, farm and family, and farm and personal health, suggest the value of a critical examination of how ‘good food’ is negotiated through the daily choices of both producers and consumers. Such information is important for not only analysing differences (and similarities) between organic and conventional food, but also for understanding distinctions within each farm sector and among consumers. These differences will, in all likelihood, be implicated in different forms of linkage between producers and consumers that will be played out tangibly in local food systems.

Food choices are themselves part of life choices. For instance, the choice between buying local conventionally grown food and buying imported organic food encompasses issues of scale, morals, ethics, environmental responsibility, political ideology, and social justice, among a host of other factors. The options available to producers and consumers are not always clear, however. Is it better to buy local conventionally grown food or to buy organic food that was shipped thousands of kilometres? Do the environmental costs of transporting organic food offset the health costs of pesticide residues? Are choices based on private interests or the public good? How do farmers balance economic viability with social responsibility? Sorting out choices is not just an academic concern; food producers and consumers negotiate this complexity on a daily basis.

Embedded in these choices is a frequently asserted contention that organic agriculture is 'good' for community (which infers that conventional food is somehow less good on these grounds). Our project seeks to engage with this long-standing contention. In challenging the presumption that organics is inherently good for community (in ways that are often undefined) we are not attempting to resolve debate between conventional versus organic, and related issues. Rather, the aim is to develop an analytical framework that will distinguish between normative and empirical aspects of the organic-conventional discourse.

This paper summarizes some preliminary thinking on what it means to say that organics is good for community. The metaphor of unpacking a box of 'good food' is used to initiate our thinking and to structure the paper. Within this "good food box" we seek to highlight the elements that characterize quality and identify testable notions for future empirical investigation relating to individual and community choices. These choices – and the reasons people give for them – both constitute and contribute to how society decides what is 'good food.'

The semantics of 'good food'

There is on-going debate within the agri-food system about the nature of 'good food.' Is locally-grown organic food good? Is locally-grown conventional food more 'good' than organic food transported thousands of kilometres? Perhaps 'good food' means maximising the "net benefits that society receives from agricultural production of food and fibre and from ecosystem services" (Tilman 2002:676). Or perhaps, as Harris (1985) suggests, 'good food' is what is good to sell. To examine the meanings of 'good food' is to examine its semantics and how people and groups negotiate its meaning.

Three dimensions of meaning

To sort through the semantics of 'good food' we can distinguish among three types, or dimensions, of meaning: material, temporal, and social (Luhmann 1993, 1995a). The material dimension of meaning relates to the subject matter at hand; a distinction that divides reference into 'this' and not 'something else.' The temporal dimension of meaning is constituted by the difference between before and after and can be expressed, for example, as the difference between past, present, and future. The social dimension of meaning concerns the societal consequences of meaning, accounting for the fact that at any time other perspectives come into consideration of one's own. It exposes meaning to the possibility of rejection or acceptance via dissent, consent, and consensus. These three dimensions re-organise the semantics of 'good food' according to ways that people construct arguments.

The material meaning of 'good food'

As the organic food industry matures, there is a need for more structure in order to simplify communications about what is 'good food.' That is, there must be a clearly defined difference – a difference that makes the difference – if the choice between

conventional and organic is to be meaningful. Central to this is sorting out what is and what is not organic (Michelson 2001; Lynggaard 2001). As an entry point we can begin by observing the semantics of 'good food' as a *distinction* between 'conventional' and 'organic.'

A distinction always has two sides, each referring to the other. Hence, one element of the meaning for organics is as a distinction from what it is not. As Conford (2001:17) points out, "If organic *methods* have existed for centuries, the organic *movement* could begin only once an alternative to them existed. This did not happen until the nineteenth century brought the industrial production of artificial fertilizers and the rapid spread of urbanisation." Michelson (2001) describes the emergence of 'organics' as a battle of language "won" because, by being recognised as 'non-conventional,' organics reflects the societal importance attached to the criticism of mainstream agriculture. To Michelson (2001), the two are distinct "good agricultural practices."

Descriptions of organic farming and conventional farming serve as ideal types (or generalised symbols, as opposed to a distinction). Knorr and Watkins characterise conventional agriculture as: "Capital-intensive, large-scale, highly mechanized agriculture with monocultures of crops and extensive use of artificial fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides, with intensive animal husbandry" (cited in Reisner 2003). A description of organic is food is free of antibiotics, made without the use of synthetic pesticides, and made without the use of animal byproducts or sewage sludge or hormones.

Without a precise definition of organics a paradox arises: the more organics is used the less meaningful it becomes. People need to know what organic means and what it constitutes – *if organics is to have meaning*. Furthermore, to be successful, organics must promote itself as an alternative (Lynggaard 2001). As such, much of the 'good food' debate takes place with respect to the 'organic' side of the distinction. A specific definition of 'organic' is important to the food industry (Campbell and Liepins 2001) and regulation of the term organic is very active, with new national and international standards (Michelson 2001; Vos 2000). In contrast, little effort is given to defining conventional; it refers to generally accepted practice of the day or, by default, to what is 'not organic.' Non-organic farming describes all farming systems that are not certified as organic (Soil Association 2001). In other words, organics is what is defined (and certified) as organic.

While drawing sharp distinctions helps to define boundaries of a debate, it is less adequate for describing the range of farming practices and consumer choices. In general use neither conventional nor organic agriculture is clearly defined. What appears at first to be a clear choice between 'good' conventional food and 'good' organic food overlooks a complex of issues. As consideration shifts from characterizations of ideal types to empirical study people's understanding of 'good food' choices become more difficult to observe. Similar motives (e.g., sustainability) match with different choices (e.g., organic; maximum profits); similar choices (e.g., organic) lead to different outcomes (e.g., personal health; soil conservation). At a minimum, we must set aside a middle ground.

The middle ground is described by several terms, including alternative, conservation, low input, no-till, integrated crop management, and (agro-)ecological. Each term describes various practices designed to reduce inputs, conserve soil, and protect the environment. These practices can be relevant to both conventional and organic farming. Hence, we find this middle ground (hereafter referred to as conservation farming) is included on both the conventional side of the ‘good food’ debate (e.g., Avery 1999, 2003) and on the organic side (e.g., Soil Association 2001).

An important aspect of the material meaning of the ‘good food’ debate is organic certification, which is central to food quality. Certification pertains to the inherent organic qualities of the product from production, processing, storage, handling and labeling, to the point of sale (Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) 1999). The US debate over the organic standards generated more public response than any other rule ever proposed by the USDA (Klonsky and Tourte 1998, cited in Allen). Canada adopted its National Standard for Organic Agriculture in 1999. At this time, however, the organic standard is not a codified federal regulation (Organic Trade Association 2003). Certification of organic producers and handlers, and accreditation of certifiers to the Canadian National Standard and the ISO 65 guidelines is voluntary, except in Quebec. The CGSB defines organic as a holistic system of production designed to optimise the productivity, and fitness of diverse communities within the agro-ecosystem, including soil organisms, plants, livestock, and people (CGSB 1999:iii). This definition includes lists of production requirements and of permitted substances. An effect of certifying organic food is to lend legitimacy to the organic side of the ‘good food’ debate.

Debate about what is and what is not organic spills over to debate about the associated benefits of ‘good food,’ such as nutrition, health, and environmental conservation. The ‘facts’ of what is good are ‘facts’ when affirmed by science. For example, the benefits of eating organic food are often featured in promotional material distributed through health food stores. One article cited a Soil Association report published in 2001 that states “organic food is both safer and better for you than non-organic food” (Wyman 2002:10). The author emphasised the scientific basis of the report, highlighting the over 400 published scientific papers used for the study. The use of “agenda-based science” (Moore 2004:25), however, is often used to dispel facts as myths propagated by “misinformation and distortion of the truth” (Moore 2004:26). Moore argues that the campaign of fear waged against genetic modification is based on agenda-based science. For its cause, the Soil Association (2001) published its own version of “myths and realities” in order to focus upon the facts of organics. Conventional does not appear to argue that it is safer or nutritionally better; it argues, with its own bevy of scientific studies, that conventional food is safe and that organics is not nutritionally better.

The temporal meaning of ‘good food’

While perhaps not at the forefront of public debate, the notion of ‘good food’ has a temporal dimension as well – one with clear moral connotations. The semantics of ‘good food’ seems to imply, for some, responsibility for future generations. The appeal to

future generations serves to moralise semantics because it enables victims and beneficiaries to be identified (Luhmann 1993). Analysis of much current (and past) discourse suggests that the conventional future envisions new technologies, such as the “invaluable gift of biotechnology” (Prakush and Conko 2004:20), that feed the increasing population without transforming more forests into farms (Avery 1999, 2003, 2004; Borlaug 2001; Moore 2004; Trawavas 2002; Prakush and Conko 2004). The organic future seems frequently to envision a variety of environmental outcomes: cleaner water, soils, and air for the health and well-being of future generations (Flores and Sarandón 2004; Lyson and Guptill 2004; Soil Association 2001, 2004; and others).

The temporal dimension of ‘good food’ is also expressed in terms of the present. The conventional argument focuses upon why it is a good choice in the present: higher productivity will benefit people who are hungry now; more efficient farming practices benefit the farmer’s bottom line today, otherwise tomorrow there will be no farm or farmer. In contrast, the semantics of organics seems to focus upon the present imbalance between private, self-interests of corporations, and public interests of consumers and family farms.

The social meaning of ‘good food’

Whereas the material dimension of the meaning of ‘good food’ sets organics as a distinction from non-organics and the temporal dimension introduces responsibility for feeding future generations as a moral issue for both conventional and organic agriculture, the social dimension of meaning sets out conditions for acceptance or rejection by others. As such, the matter of ‘good food’ is a societal issue, not strictly an economic one. The social dimension of ‘good food’ therefore concerns the agri-food system, not only the food industry. We are no longer dealing with food as a commodity (Kneen 1993; Lyson and Guptill 2004; Manning 2004; Polanyi 1944), but food as an essential “intimate” commodity (Winson 1993) – as a societal good. Herein debates resonate with broad, philosophical issues not easily separated from choices people make on a daily basis about what food to buy, where to buy it, and how much to spend. Rather than focus strictly upon private concerns for health, self-image, and convenience, producer and consumer choices about ‘good food’ are more often embedded in issues of food security, social justice, environmental responsibility, economic viability, rural vitality, and community health.

It seems that the semantics of ‘good food’ – because of its complexity – finds its own way to sort things out *for itself*. ‘Itself’ here refers to the agri-food system. Regulation of organics is a critical part of a self-organising process of coordinating how people and groups negotiate what is good. We are not talking strictly about regulation as rules but regulation as another aspect of semantics. Regulation is about how social processes stabilise and reproduce market dynamics (Cocklin and Blunden 1992, cited in Joseph). Real regulation refers to a social practice oriented around the administrative state and legal practice (Cocklin and Blunden 1992, cited in Joseph).

A further distinction is made between de-regulation and re-regulation (Joseph 1999). The former is a dominant theme of policy shifts in agriculture (e.g., minimum price guarantees, farm safety net, large-scale corporate agriculture, food inspection); the latter is seen as more characteristic of those affecting the wider rural society (e.g., nutrient management programs, protection of farmland (CFFO 2004), support for family farming, food inspection, water source quality, green belt protection, 'smart growth').

Processes of regulation take place within the semantics of organics (Campbell and Liepins 2001). Re-regulation and de-regulation, as part of the food industry's self-organising process, mediates discourse. Regulation thus fulfills an ethical function in that it determines what is 'good food' on behalf of society. In effect, regulation within the agri-food system socially conditions the food industry. It is in this respect that we can say that the food industry is embedded in the agri-food system, thus highlighting the relationship between economic and non-economic values.

Current debate about organic certification centres upon the matter of who benefits the most from certification. As the industry matures, it appears that certification benefits mainstream producers and consumers more than the original core group of producers and consumers by standardising the industry and thus increasing consumer demand.

Guiding principles are attempts to make the social meaning of 'good food' explicit. The Organic Standards of Canada state six general principles of organic production (GSBC 1999). These include: (1) protect the environment, minimise soil degradation and erosion, decrease pollution, optimise biological productivity and promote a sound state of health; (2) replenish and maintain long-term soil fertility by optimising conditions for biological activity within the soil; (3) maintain diversity within and surrounding the enterprise and protect and enhance the biological diversity of native plants and wildlife; (4) recycle materials and resources to the greatest extent possible within the enterprise; (5) provide attentive care that promotes the health and behavioural needs of livestock; and (6) maintain the integrity of organic food and processed products from initial handling to point of sale.

Agricultural policy in Ontario, although largely oriented toward conventional agriculture, offers its own set of non-descript semantics of 'good food.' This semantics, in effect, defines 'good food' for all Ontarians. A background paper on an agricultural policy framework (OMAF 2004) aims to ensure that agriculture continues to be a valuable contributor to the quality of life of all Ontarians. Here the language of quality and desirability is reflected in various goal statements pertaining to sectoral "performance" and reflecting a further semantics of food production: increase Canada's competitiveness, strengthen businesses, increase international opportunities by reducing traditional barriers to market access, overcome newer technical barriers to agri-food trade, increase prosperity, improve risk management programming, stronger, more profitable agriculture sector, increase consumer confidence in the safety and quality of food, stay ahead of the competition and accelerate the pace of science and innovation, attract even more investment funding and expertise, life sciences hold great potential for business expansion and job creation in rural areas.

In effect, the material and social dimensions of the meaning of organics correspond to different discourses. The material dimension is most relevant to the food industry whereas the social dimension is most relevant to the agri-food system and to society as a whole. From a societal view, these two meanings serve different functions. The industry-specific definition of 'organic' facilitates economic transactions, to the benefit of producers, processors, distributors, and consumers.

The broader discourse about 'good food' is an on-going negotiation of shared values. Michelson (2001) describes this discourse as an arena for achieving a balance between what as the three main sections of society, namely, market, policy, and community. It is to this latter aspect, to community, that we turn next. As the review of the semantics of 'good food' shows thus far, the differences between organic and conventional, although blurry in the details, are clearer in the extremes. By generalising, we will see how the semantics of 'good food' manifests itself as a semantics of 'goodness' embedded in the semantics of organics, formulated as local food systems, and bound to place via its associations with community. Herein lies the long-standing – and self-reproducing – contention that organics is good for community.

From 'good' to 'good for community'

In the twenty-first century, the emerging similarities and competing differences embedded in the dominant semantics of 'good food' are immersed in the broader, often disparate, discourses of globalisation and of sustainability. This broader context both simplifies people's understanding of 'good food,' organics, and the choices available to them and catalyses further debate. Matters of globalisation and sustainability are not easily separated from choices people make on a daily basis about what food to buy, where to buy it, and how much to spend on selected food items with particular chemical and geographical qualities.

Globalisation refers to a movement toward world systems, whether this may be culture, norms, values, economics, politics, ideologies, etc. It is a movement toward a homogeneous societal system. Sustainability is also about world systems. It concerns the limits to growth: Can society sustain its present levels of consumption of the world's natural and cultural resources? The two concepts are intricately related. For instance, we might ask if 'globalisation' is a sustainable mode of being. Yet the two can be irreconcilably different, promoted as mutually exclusive pathways to a better future.

The 'good food' discourse pits globalisation against sustainability through many themes. There is local versus global; sustainable versus unsustainable; conventional versus organic production; industrial farming versus family farming; corporate elitism versus local empowerment; impersonal society versus personal community; fast food versus slow food; etc. Notwithstanding that each side uses similar arguments for different ends, generalisations about globalisation and sustainability help to simplify and contrast. Mannheim's (1936) distinction between ideology and utopia helps in this regard. Critically, neither ideology nor utopia is based in reality. Ideology is about the fictions

that are used to stabilise a social system. Utopia is about the wish-dreams that are employed when any transformation of order is attempted. Globalisation can be characterised as ideology supporting industrial, resource-intensive productivist agriculture. Sustainability seeks to change the status quo by shifting attention away from maximising production to minimising consumption.

Within the globalisation and sustainability discourses, the semantics of 'good food' becomes philosophically complex, encompassing both morals and ethics. Morals and ethics define, respectively, what is good within a society and how a society judges what is good, (Laflamme 2002), and have several implications for the agri-food system (Curry 2002; Stevenson 1998). The contrasting position between conventional and organic, although generalisations, lends insight to the foundation of the 'goodness' associated with organics.

The ideology of globalisation seems to have become strongly associated with conventional agriculture with moral and ethical issues cast in light of the global issues of food security. For example, it is held by some that it is unethical to campaign against biotechnologies that will help to feed future generations (Moore 2004; Prakash and Conko 2004). Generally, moral and ethical views of conventional agriculture are espoused in the semantics of 'more' – more food, more technology, more research, more growth, more development, more knowledge – and the semantics of 'better' – better equipment, better crops, better use of inputs. This repertoire about what is *better* for society maintains an external focus: conventional agriculture is better for the economy, for business, for relieving famine, for maximising profit.

In contrast, organics, arguably, appeals to a moral good. Opponents of organic are frequently criticized for being against 'natural' order. The organic farm is commonly (stereotypically?) portrayed as small, local, rural, in harmony with nature, and family-based. Such qualities are often considered morally good (Reisner 2003). Organics advocates an internal focus on *personal* responsibility for stewardship, justice, and health and, correspondingly, for 'less' – less inputs, less interventional, less chemicals, less technology, less growth, less self-interests. Appealing to the 'good' of organics offers the advantage of using familiar distinctions, such as fresh, local, healthy, local, small-scale, family-operated, as well as environmentally friendly, sustainable, and socially just. One of the most appealing of these familiar distinctions is 'community.'

The idea of community is central to the social meaning of 'good food' because it binds agriculture to place (Connell 2004); it is a form of connection (Chiappe and Flora 1998). Community is good: it is good to be in community, good to have community (Bauman 2000); it is inclusive, participatory, local, and personal. Community is extolled, either implicitly or explicitly, as the cornerstone of sustainability through such terms as community development, community economic development, community capacity building, community cohesion, healthy community, and sustainable communities.

Community Supported Agriculture is central to the semantics of organics. According to Groh and McFadden (1997), the goal of agriculture is community, and this can only be

achieved through a healthy linkage between community and agriculture. A “community farm,” they say, is a farm that is both a community effort and a community responsibility. Thus, community supported agriculture, as the name suggests, is “shaped and expressed principally through communities” (Kloppenburger et al 1996:116). It is a local human-scale practice premised upon rediscovering stronger and richer connections of community (Kittredge 1996). More profoundly, the semantics of community supported agriculture and agriculture supported community refers to a new *social* form of agriculture (Groh and McFadden 1997). Most strikingly, with the apparent demise of the *family farm*, attention has shifted to the *community farm* (Groh and McFadden 1997), to *community agriculture* (McMichael 2000), and to *community food systems* (Feenstra 2002).

Local food systems

If it is possible to capture the semantics of organics in one concept, that concept might be ‘local food system.’ This idea, like that of civic agriculture (DeLind 2002; Lyson 2000; Lyson and Guptill 2004), localisation (Allen et al. 2003; Almås and Lawrence 2003; Hinrichs 2003), and foodshed (Kloppenburger et al 1996), explicitly link agriculture and community, for both producers and consumers. From the producer perspective, the links are between farm and town, farmer and community, farm and ecosystem, and farm household and health. On the consumer side, there are links between food and town, food and farm, food and farmer, food and community, food and ecosystem, food and health, and food and household. In effect, the semantics of goodness gets bundled into a ‘local food systems’ package, wherein ‘goodness’ conveys the moral aspect of on-going debate wherein organic is good, local is good, natural is good, family-scale farming is good, and community is good.

The idea of local food systems, of ‘local’ in particular, like other ideas discussed so far, is not immune to the problems of discourse (Allen et al. 2003). Hinrichs (2003) raises the point that local is assumed to be good, and that we must question what we mean by local if local food system is to be helpful in moving toward social change. Ultimately, Hinrichs argues, societal change depends on “the meeting and melding of producer and consumer interests, which takes place at a variety of scales and with differing outcomes even in ‘local’ food systems” (Hinrichs 2003:43). At this point we leave ‘local’ unspecified, other than to say that it refers to the local dimension of the food industry. The food industry refers to the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of food. The food industry is more strictly economic than the agri-food system, which includes research, public policy, laws, and other societal matters related to food.

The notion of distance is particularly important to local food systems (Allen et al. 2003; Kneen 1995). Distance refers to “processes that are separating people from the sources of their food and replacing diversified and sustainable food systems with a global commodified food system” (Kneen 1995:24). The material problem is that greater distancing means more resources (e.g., energy) are required to produce a calorie of food. The social problem of distance is that responsibility for what one consumes is separated (distanced) from food production; likewise, responsibility for production is separated from what one consumes. The idea of local food systems embodies the goal to reduce

distance by ensuring food is consumed as close to the point of production as possible. The idea of reducing distance corresponds to more direct contact between producer and consumer. Organisationally, this includes farmers' markets, community gardens, and community supported agriculture (CSA) and other forms of direct marketing (Allen et al 2003; Lyson and Guptill 2004).

The argument for more direct contact between producers and consumers promotes social change. Moving toward greater interdependence of economy and society, of economic and non-economic factors, challenges the existing food system (Allen et al. 2003) and the institutional interrelationships between agriculture and society (Michelson 2001). Thus, starting from seemingly incontestable facts of 'goodness' leads to a situation where the semantics of organics presumes an acceptance that organics, because it is seen as a medium of social change. Whether, and how, such visions are measurably "good" for rural communities remains a challenge and opportunity for further consideration.

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