Responsibility and agency within alternative food networks: assembling the “citizen consumer”

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Accepted: 11 April 2008 / Published online: 11 September 2008
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Abstract With “consumer demand” credited with driving major changes in the food industry related to food quality, safety, environmental, and social concerns, the contemporary politics of food has become characterized by a variety of attempts to redefine food consumption as an expression of citizenship that speaks of collective rights and responsibilities. Neoliberal political orthodoxy constructs such citizenship in terms of the ability of individuals to monitor and regulate their own behavior as entrepreneurs and as consumers. By contrast, many proponents of alternative food networks promote the idea that food citizenship is expressed through participation in social arrangements based on solidarity and coordinated action rather than on contractual and commoditized relationships between so-called “producers” and “consumers.” This paper thus focuses its analysis on the strategies used to mobilize people as consumers of particular products and the ways, in turn, in which people use their consumption choices as expressions of social agency or citizenship. In particular, the paper examines how the marketing, pricing, and distribution of foods interact with food standards to enable and constrain specific expressions of food citizenship. It is argued that narrow and stereotypical constructions of the “ethical consumer” help to limit the access of particular people and environmental values, such as biodiversity, to the ethical marketplace.

Keywords Citizenship · Ecological citizenship · Neoliberalism · Organic food · Scale

Introduction

We’re buying seven million kilos of organic cotton from Turkey and India, and additional supplies from China, Texas and elsewhere. This ... will keep millions of kilos of chemicals out of the environment. What’s more, we will make these organic products more affordable for consumers all around the world, thanks to our large-volume buying and distribution efficiencies. This means that families on a budget will be able to dress their children in organic cotton, and feed them organic vegetables and formula – all at a Wal-Mart price (Scott 2006).

Wal-Mart’s aggressive move in early 2006 into the market for certified organic food and fiber speaks to one of the most enduring points of concern within alternative food and agriculture movements; that is, the possibility that mainstream agribusiness and retailer involvement in the production and/or sale of organic products will undermine the principles on which growth in the organic sector has been based. For at the same time that mainstream retailer involvement has increased the availability and affordability of organic foods (democratizing, according to Wal-Mart, access to organic foods for the ordinary families who cannot afford 20% or greater price premiums), it has also encouraged the lengthening and intensification of organic supply chains (see Lockie et al. 2006b). On the production side, it is feared that ‘conventionalized’ organic foodways will no longer provide a genuine alternative to the off-farm inputs, excessive processing, wasteful packaging, long-distance transportation, and exploitative labor practices that characterize mainstream supply chains; they simply will replace proscribed synthetic inputs with allowable biological inputs. On the consumption side, apparent demand for the

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products of globalized organic supply chains seems only to support the popular contention that the vast majority of consumers of organic foods do so mostly, if not entirely, for their own pleasure and/or well-being.

Reflecting these concerns, numerous writers and activists have called for various forms of food system re-localization. In some respects, the case for re-localization seems self-evident. Reducing the spatial, temporal, social, and economic distance between producers and consumers by eating locally and seasonally promises both to reduce food miles and to ensure that more of the consumer's food dollar ends up in the pocket of producers. In turn, this shifts downwards the economies of scale necessary to support a socially acceptable livelihood for food producers and increases opportunities for farmers to internalize and recoup the full environmental and social costs of production. Yet localism has attracted its critics. As DuPuis and Goodman (2005) argue, the local can be site of inequality and exclusion. In fact, "unreflexive localism can lead to a potentially undemocratic, unrepresentative, and defensive militant particularism" that obscures the local politics of race, class, and gender (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, p. 362). As unfriendly as global capitalism may seem, there are no inevitable connections between localized production-consumption networks, resistance to capitalist relations, and the promotion of community building, quality, sustainability, and healthfulness.

Nevertheless, the possibility that people might inflect their choices as "consumers" with the values that underlie their responsibilities as "citizens" has been identified by numerous social movement organizations and governments as a potential force for sustainability (Seyfang 2006); a force that has already been credited by many with driving growth in the organic sector and numerous other greening and corporate social responsibility initiatives (see Lockie et al. 2006b). But consumption practices are not pre-given phenomena to which retailers and others passively respond. They are phenomena that a variety of groups—from governments to food businesses to farm lobby groups, consumer organizations, environmental NGOs, and others—actively seek—with varying degrees of success—to shape. The objective of this paper is thus to examine how the techniques used to mobilize people as consumers within particular networks of food production and exchange act to limit the access of particular people and environmental values, such as biodiversity, to the ethical marketplace. Whatever else might be said about contemporary food consumption, we clearly are dealing with a complex and contested terrain. For the purposes of this paper, our path into that terrain will follow competing attempts to redefine food consumption practices as expressions of citizenship; that is, as activities that speak not only of individual tastes and preferences, but as

activities that speak also of collective moral rights and responsibilities. The first of these is based on notions of ecological citizenship and the second on the political rationality of neoliberalism. The paper will then examine the specific pricing, retail geography and representational strategies that have been used in attempts to mobilize people as consumers of organic foods and the ways in which these have failed to capture both the complexity of organic consumption practices and the extent to which such practices have incorporated aspects of both the ecological and neoliberal citizenship models.

Mobilizing the "citizen consumer"

A number of authors have called on concepts of ecological citizenship to advocate a new set of relationships among those involved in food provisioning based on principles of democracy, food security, commitment to place, public work, and transparency of power relations (e.g., Baker 2004; DeLind 2002; Seyfang 2006). The "food citizen" is portrayed by these authors as an active participant in the construction of alternative food networks that support sustainable local production and communities (Baker 2004). Community gardens emerge as the paradigmatic example of a new political space in which people with hitherto few options but to passively accept their roles as "consumers" of whatever the food industry chose to supply them with (or to withhold!) are empowered to take responsibility for themselves, their communities, and their environments. Farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and other networks that rely on the separation of participants into distinct groups of "producers" and "consumers" are seen as more modest steps in this direction. Quoting Gabriel and Lang (1995, p. 182), DeLind (2002) argues that no matter how green and friendly the relationships between farmers and their customers might be, commoditized exchange offers fewer opportunities for "social solidarity, civic debate, coordinated action or sacrifice." According to DeLind (2002), as long as alternative agriculture networks remain based on a producer-consumer model, participants will continue to think of themselves as entrepreneurs first and as community builders second.

This construction of citizenship as active engagement within local communities contrasts with the more traditional framing of citizenship in terms of the rights and responsibilities of individuals vis-à-vis the state (see Turner 1993), and begs the question as to whether a localization of citizenship obligations is the only alternative to a polity defined by the nation-state. Indeed, for key authors on the theoretical foundations of ecological citizenship such as Dobson (2000), the global dimensions of ecological issues dictate that collective responsibility be

based on a de-territorialized ethic of care towards others irrespective of whether these others are in a position to offer reciprocal rights and obligations. Citizenship is thus conceptualized as both global and cosmopolitan. However, the focus of “food citizenship” proponents on localization is not an unreasonable interpretation of this concept. For Dobson (2000, pp. 59–60), the most significant contribution of ecological citizenship to our understanding of citizenship more broadly is “the admission of citizenship activity to the private realm.” Arguing that it is the private realm which generates the ecological footprint “that gives rise to the obligations of ecological citizenship,” Dobson (2003, p. 139) identifies the self-regulation of individual consumption as the link between the ecological citizen and their international and intergenerational responsibilities. How is this to be interpreted by the ecological citizen if not as a call to “do their bit” by “recycling, buying ‘green’ products, reducing consumption, taking a holiday close to home or getting involved in community environmental initiatives” (Latta 2007, p. 380)?

Alternative visions of ecological citizenship are, of course, possible. While this paper will not review attempts to develop such visions within the ecological citizenship literature more broadly (see Latta 2007), it is worth noting DuPuis and Goodman’s (2005; see also DuPuis et al. 2006) attempt to conceptualize a more cosmopolitan politics of localism within the agrifood literature. “Reflexive localization,” they contend, demands not only an analysis of the micro-dynamics of power and exclusion within alternative food networks but also a spatial and temporal awareness of how locales, and the communities through which they are defined, connect with other locales and other communities. Drawing on Amin (2002), the shift they propose is from a politics *of* place (through which the local is valorized and defended) to a politics *in* place (through which locales are seen as inter-connected sites in which the multiscalar politics of globalization are embedded and contested). Such a politics continues to advocate the values of democracy, food security, commitment to place and community, transparency, and resistance to the systemic “placeness” of global industrial agriculture. However, it does so while arguing against a reification of the local as the sole alternative to anomic global capitalism and for an understanding of the local and the global as mutually constitutive levels of social organization (DuPuis and Goodman 2005).

To illustrate this latter point, DuPuis and Goodman (2005) draw attention to innovations in the management of global capitalism that emphasize the use of sub-national or devolved forms of governance. Localization is not, they argue, an alternative to globalization but an intrinsic part of it; a potentially “dangerous political bargain” that—through its appeal both to “left” ideals of political participation and “right” ideals of non-interference in markets—

may be used to justify the withdrawal of state services and protections (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, p. 368). It is a mistake, however, to dismiss devolutionist forms of governance as little more than a neoliberal sleight of hand (see Lockie and Higgins 2007).

As a way of thinking about the project of government, in its widest sense, neoliberalism has sought since the Second World War to construct citizenship in terms of the ability of individuals to monitor and regulate their own behavior, both as “entrepreneurs” and as “consumers” (Burchell 1993; Lemke 2001; Miller and Rose 1990). This does not necessarily signal the demise of state interest in the regulation of “civil society” or “the market,” but a preference for policy settings that focus less on regulation and the direct provision of public services and more on creating conditions under which individuals and businesses are enabled to take greater responsibility for themselves and their conduct (Rose 1999). Far from abandoning individuals and communities to the vagaries of the global marketplace, the neoliberal state promotes capacity building, active citizenship, and self-responsibility, on the one hand, and monitoring, audit, and accountability, on the other (Dean 1999; Higgins and Lockie 2002). This is an uneven and contested process (Peck and Tickell 2002). Nevertheless, taking Australia as an example, neoliberal governance in the domain of food production has seen the withdrawal of state support for farm welfare and productivity measures in favor of programs that promote farmers’ business and environmental planning capabilities (Higgins and Lockie 2001); reinforce private property rights (Lockie 2006a); encourage local and regional cooperative activity to address spatially and temporally dispersed problems such as land and water degradation (Lockie 2006a); and otherwise help producers adjust to the “discipline” of the market. Similarly, in the domain of food consumption, the role of the state has shifted somewhat from protecting the public (through food safety regulation, provision of school meals, etc.) to helping “consumers” and “entrepreneurs” make the correct choices by providing them with technical assistance and information (Draper and Green 2002). This assistance may take the form of product labels, nutrition guidelines, process standards, education and training, environmental data, and so on.

It is acknowledged that this re-definition of citizenship is not only a contested and incomplete process, but one in which the state’s self-identified responsibility to facilitate choice among citizen consumers may be subservient, at times, to the interests of favored entrepreneurs. Resistance among a number of national governments to the labeling of genetically modified foods—despite consumer concerns regarding both the safety of these products and the right to make an informed choice—being an obvious example. It is also acknowledged that neoliberalism and the strategies

through which it is operationalized, including devolution, may take a variety of forms depending on specific spatial and regulatory contexts.

These caveats aside, the key point here is that there is no intrinsic contradiction between the idea that governments should create conditions under which consumer and entrepreneur citizens can make appropriate choices and the idea that food citizens should consider the impacts of their productive and consumptive behavior on others and on environments as advocated by ecological citizenship. In fact, many neoliberals would argue that failure to consider such impacts is a reflection of market failure that only strengthens the argument for continued market reform (see Lockie 2006a). It is for this very reason that proponents of alternative food networks have been able to draw on the rhetoric of “individual choice” and “consumer demand” to successfully oppose moves by governments and agrifood companies to restrict access to information and to engage in practices that threaten what might be represented as legitimate entrepreneurial activities. Conflict over genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in food and agriculture is a case in point. While claims that these organisms constitute significant intrinsic environmental, health, and/or moral risks have struggled to gain traction with the majority of regulatory agencies, arguments regarding threats to market access for GM produce, the rights of consumers to make their own decisions regarding whether or not to ingest GMOs, and the rapid growth in sales of certified organic (and therefore GMO-free) produce, have had considerable influence; resulting in the introduction of stricter labeling regimes in the European Union and the exclusion of GMOs from the own-brand products of several leading food retail chains in the UK (Lockie and Salem 2005).

None of this is to imply that neoliberal rationality is politically neutral or benign. Although supportive of active citizenship, the scope and scale of activity underlying the expression of that citizenship is circumscribed in important ways. Participation in overtly political and democratic activities such as deliberation, communal planning, and decision making, etc., is localized while the wider field of social and economic relationships is reduced to a depoliticized arena of personal consumption choices. Not only this is based on an assumption of rational utility maximizing behavior that does not adequately reflect how people actually behave (Barnett et al. 2005), it obfuscates the manner in which information, product supply, and regulatory regimes are influenced or controlled by other actors such as large agrifood firms (Lockie and Salem 2005). While neoliberalism encourages state agencies to favor measures that promote prudent and entrepreneurial behavior among farmers and consumers, clearly these agencies are not the only actors attempting to influence food consumption practices both directly and indirectly.

Market research, advertising, retail geography, product development, retail pricing, product labeling, standards regimes, and so on, may all be understood as techniques used to mobilize people as consumers of particular products by creating connections between “the active choices of potential consumers and the qualities, pleasures, and satisfactions represented” in those products (Miller and Rose 1997, pp. 30–31). Access to the information, expertise, and other resources with which to deploy these techniques is, therefore, a critical resource in defining and shaping the choices of responsible “citizen consumers.”

In contrast to this depoliticized model of consumption, food citizenship proponents draw explicit attention to the power relations invoked by commoditized food production and exchange. However, they do so by establishing a binary opposition between depoliticized consumption and individualism, on the one hand, and citizenship, engagement, and solidarity, on the other (Barnett et al. 2005). This binary discounts the potential for people to utilize alternative commodity networks as avenues for political expression by communicating preferences to producers and governments and by establishing more democratic networks of production and consumption (see Barnett et al. 2005). Further, by arguing that authentic expressions of citizenship are intrinsically local, this binary dismisses the economic globalization of neoliberalism but circumscribes the scope and scale of active citizenship in almost exactly the same way. This sets food citizens in an uneasy relationship with expressions of global or cosmopolitan citizenship that extend beyond the reduction of localized ecological footprints.

Fair trade offers a useful example here. Fair trade seeks not to abolish international commodity exchange but to reform it by establishing new forms of exchange between resource-poor Southern producers and Northern consumers that provide higher cash returns to farmers while encouraging use of these premiums to support improved environmental management, product quality, and community development, in addition to more basic needs such as education, medicines, and clothing (Goodman 2004; Lockie and Goodman 2006). Such trade is not necessarily rejected altogether but is treated as a residual category covering a limited number of commodities that either cannot be produced locally or which are critical, at least in the short-term, to groups of extremely marginalized producers (see Seyfang 2006). Even still, some food system localists reject the notion that fair trade offers benefits to Southern Producers and/or seek to appropriate the terminology of fair trade to re-define relationships between Northern producers and consumers (for critical reviews see Lockie 2007; Wilkinson 2006).

The key point here is not that alternative food networks either should, or should not, adopt particular models of citizenship, but that the values, relationships, and scales that

ought to characterize food networks are not self-evident (Hinrichs 2003). For DuPuis and Goodman (2005), this suggests a need for more research into the deployment of localism both for and against the forces of globalization. The risk here is of slipping back into simplistic binary oppositions between the local (albeit in the form of networked locales) and the big, the global, the powerful, and so on. It is argued here that understanding more completely the mobilization of people within alternative food networks requires us to expand our consideration beyond the local/global divide and to examine in more detail the techniques that are used to guide particular people towards what a variety of actors believe to be the “correct” consumption choices.

Mobilizing the organic food consumer

This section is focused on how people are mobilized as consumers within one group of alternative food networks—those supplying certified organic foods. As we have seen, large retailers such as Wal-Mart promote a vision of democratic access to organic foods based on price and availability through existing mainstream sales channels. Consistent with the neoliberal model of market rule, this is closely allied with notions of efficiency that are, in turn, linked to supply chain models based on economies of scale in production and on highly concentrated and centralized distribution and retailing systems. As we have also seen, proponents of food citizenship promote a quite different vision of democratic access to organic foods based on direct participation in decentralized, small-scale, and localized networks of production and distribution. And there is yet another group of producers and suppliers of organic food who are not at all concerned with democratic access, but who seek instead to position organic foods as gourmet products in order to attract a more limited number of consumers willing to pay substantial price premiums.

What we see here are competing attempts not simply to attract the “consumer dollar” but to define how people *ought* to behave as consumers and how producers and retailers *ought* to facilitate and shape that behavior. At issue here is not whether certified organic foods offer, by themselves, the “correct” consumption choice, but how competing projects have emerged to define both the “correct” form and context for organic food consumption, and the specific people to whom those choices should be made available.

One of the most important features of this competition to mobilize “organic consumers” is how little it has depended, to date, on the mass marketing techniques of the conventional food sector. While organic foods have been represented in the Western mass media as the natural alternative to almost everything risky, damaging or uncertain about industrialized food systems (Lockie

2006b), they have been the subject of limited advertising, discounting, or other explicit promotion (Halpin and Brueckner 2004a; Richter et al. 2001). Where organic products have been accompanied at the point of retail by some sort of information or promotional material this has been dominated by vague claims that organic foods are free from chemicals and/or that organic production is “environmentally friendly” (Halpin and Brueckner 2004a; Richter et al. 2001). According to Richter et al. (2001), this has reflected a belief among European retail chains that their customers were predominantly motivated by health when buying organic foods. Yet almost none had undertaken research to ascertain whether this was true or who their organic customers actually were.

In light of the limited promotion of organic foods (Halpin and Brueckner 2004a; Richter et al. 2001), the usual explanation for rapid market growth is strong consumer demand stimulated by a lack of trust in conventional food systems induced by repeated food safety scares (see Lockie 2006b).¹ To the extent that this is true, the question is left hanging as to how the organic sector was able to position itself as a realistic and credible alternative capable of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of farmers internationally to meet this demand. Arguably, the most important factors here were the deliberate focus of early organic sector organizations (such as the UK-based Soil Association formed in 1945): first, on establishing a research and communication agenda to develop and promote practical organic farming practices; and second, on the establishment of private regulatory regimes to oversee the development, inspection, and certification of organic production and labeling standards (Lockie et al. 2006a). Prior to the establishment of these two aspects of industry and market infrastructure there was no basis on which to differentiate organic from conventional foods, nor to secure farmgate and retail price premiums for them. From a neoliberal perspective, they can thus be seen as positive steps to address market failure by assisting farmers to recognize and internalize the environmental costs of production, and thence to pass these costs on to consumers.

However, widespread concern has been expressed that standards regimes encourage organic production to focus more on compliance with a minimum set of production standards—reflecting only those values that are relatively easy to codify—than on a holistic approach to

¹ In 2002, the organic market grew approximately 12% in North America, 8% in Europe, and 15–20% in Australia (Sahota 2004). Following several years of growth between 20% and 40%, the UK experienced a slowing of expansion mirrored in other European countries with comparatively large organic markets (Sahota 2004). Average retail price premiums for organic foods range from 10% to 15% in Germany to 80% in Australia and 10–100% in the US and UK (Halpin and Brueckner 2004b; Sligh and Christman 2003).

agroecosystem and community sustainability (for a critical review see Lockie and Halpin 2005). Despite this concern, there can be little doubt that independent third party certification of compliance with organic process standards has played a major role in securing the trust of consumers who, in the majority of cases, do not have direct contact with the organic farmers producing their food. This was illustrated by the implementation of a uniform national standard in the US in 2002 which, despite being seen as less rigorous than many existing schemes, has still been credited with boosting consumer awareness and confidence in organic produce and with clearing the way for its entry into mainstream supermarkets (Sahota 2004). The key point here is that the organic sector has not simply expanded production to meet demand, but that active steps have been taken to create and organize a market for “certified organic” foods into which additional producers, processors, distributors, retailers, and consumers could be recruited.

Concern has also been expressed that reliance on standards and certification regimes to organize the “organic market” create conditions of scarcity that have more to do with the exclusion of particular groups of producers and consumers than they do with the transparent internalization and transfer of the full environmental and social costs of production (see Guthman 2004). While it is likely that any suppression of market expansion is short-term due to the incentives that price premiums provide to expand supply (Lockie et al. 2006a), there is evidence that the magnitude of retail price premiums is more reflective of consumer demand and capacity to pay than of the real costs of production and distribution. Within Australia, for example, retail price premiums for organic food are substantially higher than are farm-gate premiums (Hassall and Associates 1996); there is considerable variation in retail premiums both within and between cities (Halpin and Brueckner 2004b); and a substantial number of processors and distributors report that the only extra cost incurred by them in dealing with organic produce is the *inconvenience* of keeping it separated from conventional produce (Halpin and Brueckner 2004b). With the majority of consumers either not able or willing to pay premiums higher than 15%, on price alone it seems obvious that organic foods are likely to be far less accessible to the less affluent than they are to others.

This is reflected and, in turn, aggravated by the retail geography of organic foods; a point neatly illustrated by Barnett et al.’s (2005, p. 47) description of the availability of various “green” and “ethical” produce in the UK:

If one walks down the Gloucester Road in the Bishopton area ... in the space of about 500 yards you can pass by a whole range of retail outlets where one can buy fairly traded food and clothes, shop in charity shops, buy organic produce, eat in coffee shops and

pubs selling fairly-traded or organic food and drink. It is actually quite difficult not to be an “ethical consumer” if you live close to this middle-class part of town. By way of contrast ... Hartcliffe, an outer estate [and] one of the most deprived wards in the whole of the UK ... is a veritable “food desert.”

This is not an isolated or accidental example. Whole Foods Market, currently the largest single retailer of certified organic foods in the US, invites potential investors via its corporate website to suggest new store locations. The criteria for position selection stress that potential sites should have good road frontage, plenty of parking, and be located in areas with disproportionately high incomes and levels of college education.

If there is anything surprising about the actual profile of organic consumers it is that they do not conform to the stereotype of the middle-class health nut to nearly the extent that marketing to this stereotype suggests they should. In fact, most studies have found very little relationship between rising income and rising consumption of organic foods and plenty of evidence that most regular organic consumers are motivated by a range of values that extend beyond their own well-being (Lockie et al. 2004). Avoiding wastage, favoring lower value-added unprocessed foods, and utilizing multiple distribution networks are all strategies used by committed organic consumers on lower incomes to get “value for money” and balance household budgets (Lockie 2002). Of course, most of these strategies are based, at face value, on essentially individualized acts that fit comfortably with the neoliberal notion of self-responsibility. But they may also draw on more collective actions and strategies. Barnett et al. (2005, p. 47), for example, point to the role of social movement organizations such as consumer cooperatives in mobilizing alternative retail geographies based on different social relationships, different representations of organic food, and more accessible pricing structures. Within the “veritable food desert” of Hartcliffe, described above, a “local cooperative group, Food for All, provides some retail access to locally produced organic food ... but this ... is less about exercising choice than about improving the provision of basic staples” (Barnett et al. 2005, p. 47).

Despite often acrimonious debates within the organic sector over what systems of provision for organic food *ought* to look like, there is some evidence that the different types of production and distribution network that have been established meet different consumer needs, and that the variety of distribution channels available has increased total levels of certified organic food consumption within each of those channels (see Lockie et al. 2006a, b). Internationally, those countries in which mainstream supermarkets have moved seriously into the promotion and

sale of certified organic products have experienced the highest rates of growth in organic sales (Hamm et al. 2002). This is attributed by Richter et al. (2001) to the increased visibility and availability of organic foods facilitated by mainstream supermarkets and by Hamm et al. (2002) to the reduced distribution costs and retail price premiums enabled by the economies of scale of larger retailers. Thus, while the mainstream supermarket share of organic sales has grown, this has come about more through total market growth than through parasitization of other retail channels (Richter et al. 2001). Direct farm-to-consumer sales channels—such as farmers' markets, box schemes, and community supported agriculture programs—have also experienced strong absolute growth. So too have natural foods retail chains—such as Whole Foods Market and Wild Oats—that offer a greater product range than do small health food stores and which, in the US, account for nearly half of all certified organic sales (Sligh and Christman 2003). The “losers” in the organic market appear to be smaller health food stores and other specialty retailers who compete most directly with natural foods chains (Richter et al. 2001).

There are at least three reasons why the development of both mainstream and alternative retail channels for organic foods may have had positive impacts on the magnitude of the certified organic market. The first is that while mainstream retailers have used organic product lines as part of a strategy to compete on quality, they remain the sales channel most likely to be accessed by consumers for whom price, convenience, and/or the continuation of established shopping habits are more important than is actively seeking out safer, healthier or more ethical products (Lockie et al. 2006a). While such consumers are unlikely to participate, in the first instance, in less mainstream food networks, there is some chance that their exposure to organic foods and product information through conventional supermarket chains will stimulate their interest in food quality issues and lead to a diversification of shopping behaviors. The second reason is that even those who are committed to participating in alternative food networks are likely to make regular use, to varying degrees, of mainstream retailers. It is fairly well established that the most dedicated consumers of organic foods are women who take responsibility within their households for shopping and cooking for other family members (Cunningham 2001; Lockie et al. 2004). Not surprisingly, the day-to-day reality of juggling multiple responsibilities means that convenience is also important to these women. Under such circumstances, it is reasonable to speculate that the availability of organic foods through mainstream retail channels acts both as a supplement to alternative outlets and helps to maintain commitment to consuming a mostly organic diet. Third, much of the appeal of certified organic foods lies not only

in their claims to food safety and nutrition, but in their ability to signify a less tangible sense of authenticity—that is, to convey a sense of naturalness, tradition, community, and trustworthiness—as opposed to what is seen as the artificiality and riskiness of industrially produced foods. The visible presence, therefore, of alternative, community-based networks of production, distribution, and consumption is as important to the perceived integrity of organic foods as is their official certification. Recognizing this, an increasing number of mainstream supermarkets and natural foods chains are moving beyond store layouts and promotional materials that simply mimic the look and feel of traditional marketplaces and are encouraging the regular use of their facilities by genuine farmers' markets. Others are publicizing their support for short supply chains by sourcing local produce and displaying the name and location of participating farms on packaging and signage (Marsden 2003; Marsden and Sonnino 2005). Such arrangements serve to capitalize both on the authenticity of alternative retail channels and on the diverse product range and perceived convenience of the larger retailers.

Conclusion

The neoliberal and ecological models of food citizenship reflect a palpable tension in the organic sector between the pursuit of growth and the pursuit of more community-based food systems. There is a clear danger that participants who retain a substantial commitment to conventional food processing and/or retailing will seek to capitalize on market opportunities raised by the political project of organic agriculture while watering down its critique by ignoring highly complex and politicized issues—such as biodiversity loss and food transportation—and representing organic foods in vague and fuzzy terms. Nevertheless, evidence of positive feedback between mainstream and alternative organic food networks may be interpreted to suggest that the biggest danger to the growth of these latter networks—at least in the short-term—is not their capture by larger retailers but the stereotypical framing of organic food consumption as an egocentric practice of the middle-class health nut. One of the reasons that Wal-Mart has been able to promote its expansion of organic product lines as an exercise in democratization has been the deliberate targeting by other retail outlets of the middle and upper classes. This is not an accident, an aberration, nor a straightforward reflection of consumer demand, but a logical consequence of the pricing, retail geography, and representation of organic foods. That the organic market has continued to grow—despite this narrow targeting and despite significant retail price premiums—suggests that the presence of multiple retail channels promoting a variety of

“values” has been crucial in attracting and educating different types of potential organic consumer. Some of these channels speak of authenticity, community, care, and so on. Others speak more of familiarity, convenience, and/or value for money. If the objective is to promote more alternative networks of production and consumption (as opposed to increasing certified organic food consumption for its own sake), the challenge is to utilize the opportunities provided by multiple retail channels to enroll more people as organic consumers, in the first instance, and thence to shift not only their ideas about food quality, but their ideas about what is familiar, what is convenient, what constitutes value for money and, ultimately, for whom they are responsible when making consumption choices.

Despite their differences, both ecological and neoliberal models of citizenship proffer a future in which people take responsibility for the consequences of their consumption behavior. No longer the passive recipients of whatever the food industries supply, “food citizens” must act reflexively and proactively to re-invent for themselves their identities and practices as food consumers. The danger in this “political bargain,” as DuPuis and Goodman (2005) put it, is not so much the possibility that neoliberal states will utilize discourses of individual responsibility and community capacity to legitimate the withdrawal of services and protections, but that the political arena in which citizens might participate is bounded by the choices made available to them as consumers. It is particularly telling, in this context, that while based on a critique of power relations inherent in the project of globalization, the promotion of localism as the only logical alternative to global capitalism circumscribes the scope and scale of active citizenship in more-or-less exactly the same way as do neoliberal models of the self-monitoring and self-regulating citizen-consumer/entrepreneur. Local food networks that encourage rural development and community building are easily accommodated within the logic of neoliberal governance.

A more cosmopolitan model of food citizenship must, therefore, consider how the scope and scale of citizenship activity may extend both beyond the locale and beyond the injunction to reduce one’s own ecological footprint. Fair trade is clearly one such model in action. Given the dynamics of the organic market, it is important to give particular consideration to the relationship between citizen consumers and mainstream retail channels which have focused much debate in relation to fair trade (see Lockie 2007). For neither organics nor fair trade is consumer choice—even the accumulated decisions of a large number of individual consumers—sufficient to shape their respective marketplaces. As Holzer (2006) points out, large retailers have considerable capacity to control the supply of goods (and, we might add, the signifiers attached to those goods through branding, packaging, and promotional

material). By themselves, consumer choices do little to challenge this since the refusal of individuals to buy a particular product does not necessarily result in the supply of a more desirable alternative. The mechanism, Holzer (2006) argues, through which the monetary resources of people as consumers can be translated into genuine influence is the involvement of social movement organizations capable of articulating a problem, identifying its causes, suggesting solutions, and issuing calls to action. Such organizations are as useful to retailers and producers as they are to putative consumers; providing valuable insights into the usually muddy waters of “consumer demand.” Private certification bodies, consumer cooperatives, local food coalitions, environmental NGOs, and others have taken a key role in organizing the organic market and in providing the mechanisms through which people could use consumption choices to signal support for the political project of organic agriculture (see Barnett et al. 2005). Cosmopolitan food citizenship demands that the foci of these organizations remain broad; that they work at a diversity of scales challenging localist particularism as much as anomic capitalism; that they provide multiple avenues for mobilization; and that no one alternative food network is taken as the model for an entire food system.

Acknowledgements The author would like to acknowledge financial support provided by the Australian Research Council for the project “The production and regulation of agricultural biodiversity” (Project No. DP0664599).

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