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Abstract

Initial assessments of the potential for organic food systems have offered an optimistic interpretation of the progressive political and ethical characteristics involved. This positive gloss has prompted a stream of critique emphasising the need to explore the ambiguities and disconnections inherent therein. In this paper, we consider the case of Riverford Organic vegetables¹, arguably the largest supplier of organic vegetables in the UK, and suggest that existing debates assume too much about the ‘goods’ and ‘rights’ of organic food and leave important questions about the spaces and ethics of organic food. We argue that, in the case of Riverford, the space of organic food production and distribution is neither the small, local, counter-cultural farm nor the large, transnational, corporate firm. Rather, simultaneously, the spaces of organic food production and distribution are the national network, the regional distribution system and the local farm. In addition, in the case of Riverford, the ethics of organic food exhibit few grand designs (of environmental sustainability, for example). Rather, the ethics of organic food are best characterised as: *ordinary*, since they relate to concerns about taste, value for money, care within the family and so on; *diverse*, since multiple practices steer the production and distribution of organic food; and *graspable*, in that both vegetables and box have material and symbolic presence for consumers.

Key Words

Ethical consumption, Ethics, Organic production and distribution, Scale, Space

Introduction: The Politics and Ethics of ‘Alternative’ Food

This paper investigates the complex and diverse ethics represented in and practiced through a scheme operated by a firm based in Devon, England – Riverford Organic Vegetables – to deliver regular boxes of organic food to consumers across a significant stretch of Southern and Middle England. Although the debates around the ethics of organic food have typically been framed around a divide between production (see, for example, Hall and Mogyorody 2001, Kaltoft and Risgaard 2006, Rigby and Young 2000), and consumption (see, for example, Cunningham 2001; Davies et al 1995; Lockie et al 2002, 2004; Makatouni 2001), we attempt here to advance a somewhat different theorisation of ethical consumption through a detailed case study of the organisation and practice of Riverford’s organic food production and distribution enterprise. Thus, this paper relates to consumption only indirectly, showing how Riverford communicates with consumers, and how consumers are provided with containers of food whose materiality is part of the message being conveyed by the supplier. This approach is therefore marked by both limitation and opportunity. The limitation is that we do not present empirical evidence of ideological, performative or relational aspects of the identity of ethical consumers of Riverford organic food. The opportunity is to explore an alternative point of entry into debates on the ethical consumption of organic food. Here, then, we focus our interest on the food itself – its production and distribution, its quality and significance – as understood by individuals involved with the Riverford operation, and by

Riverford as constituted collectively. Our aim, therefore, is to demonstrate how Riverford constructs particular possibilities for consumption. Such an approach is hardly novel given the recent fashion of "following the thing" (Cook 2004), but we argue that it does offer particular inflections on the ethics of consuming organic food, in terms of the ways in which a producer and distributor of organic food constructs ethical possibilities for its consumers, at least in part by constructing a strong sense of its own actions, and the reasons for and identity of those actions. In so doing, there arises an interesting juxtaposition of production and consumption.

Before narrating the case study of Riverford, however, it is important to place this particular form of organic food production in the wider conceptual frames of the ethicality and spatiality of organic agriculture. Initial assessments of the potential for organic food systems have offered an optimistic interpretation of the progressive political and ethical characteristics involved (see ECRA no date, Tovey 2002) and of the local nature of organic ethics (see Halweil 2004, Nabhan 2002). The organic nature of food is seen to have provided an alternative to the perceived health risks of chemically-induced foodstuffs, and to suggest natural, sustainable and wholesome eating. Moreover, the supposedly localised nature of organic food is claimed to have reduced the food miles inherent in conventional food commodity chains and produced a trusting (re)connection between the anxious consumer and the responsive producer (Jackson et al 2006, Thiers 2002, Winter 2003). As DuPuis and Goodman (2005) emphasise, the local has offered a space in which particular ethical norms and values could flourish, and organic food systems could thus become strongly embedded in ethics of care, stewardship, and agrarian vision, ranging from resistance to anomic and contradictory capitalist forces in the US, to a more Eurocentric rural imaginary in

which cultural identity has grown out of more pluralistic approaches to rural development (see also Marsden et al 2002). Research in New Zealand, for example, (Coombes and Campbell 1998) has emphasised the ability of organic farming to run on agricultural time and to rest on seemingly conflict-free local values and knowledges, thus constituting a conscious response to the contradictions of capitalism (see also Morgan and Murdoch 2000). National contexts of the local vary considerably, however, and as Campbell and Liepins (2001) emphasise, in New Zealand the preoccupation of agribusiness with export markets means that the domestic organic market is often left to small-scale farmers. In ethical terms, then, these localist politics of food imply production and consumption of food which is undertaken within a spatialised ethics of care and health (Hartwick 1998, Holloway and Kneafsey 2004) in which the connectedness and closeness between producers and consumers is consummated in practical relationships based on mutual regard (Sage 2003). Local food thereby achieves an 'alternative' ethics through re-embeddedness both in local ecologies (Murdoch et al 2000) and local social relationships (Friedmann 1994). Local food brings local freedom (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002) spurning the shaping of the locale by distant others in favour of a local which represents a place of caring resistance, a place of hope, an unfolding line of flight which counterposes the demands of globalised capital (Murdoch and Miele 1999, 2002; Murdoch et al 2000).

This positive gloss on the politics and ethics of local alternative food systems has prompted a stream of critique emphasising the need to explore the ambiguities and disconnections inherent therein. Excellent reviews by Allen et al (2003), DuPuis and Goodman (2005) and Hinrichs (2000, 2003) highlight three significant areas of

disquiet. First, there is a need for caution over the unreflexive localisms which arise from an emancipatory food agenda that relies so heavily on the mobilisation of place-centred imaginaries (DuPuis 2002, Goodman and DuPuis 2002). As Hinrichs (2003) argues, given that globalization and localization are related and mutually constituting, it is to be expected that desirable social and environmental outcomes will not map directly and neatly onto the spatial content of any socially constructed 'local'. In other words, localist food regimes will not be inherently just in their labour and environment relations (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000), neither will they become equally available to all social groups of consumers (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002). Secondly, the ethical values attached to local alternative food systems may be internally contradictory. For example, Allen et al (2003) argue that emphasis on localism will often privilege ecological sustainability over social justice, not least because the former will be regulated more directly than the latter. Indeed, the very nature of regulation may expose contradictions within ecological sustainability itself. Lockie et al (2000) highlight the potential risk that the meaning of 'organic' food will alter as organics become bifurcated in the regulatory arena into a concern for environment and a concern for health, as differences emerge in the compliance with certification requirements in these two areas. Thirdly, there is the danger that the political and the ethical trappings of organic food systems will be subverted in a process of 'mainstreaming' through corporate co-option (see Kaltoft 1999). As 'quality' food products are increasingly able to secure premium prices, so organic agriculture is increasingly being used to generate excess profits as part of a market-led and value-added commercial model (Goodman D 2004).

These concerns are neatly captured by Guthman's (1998, 2003, 2004) account of organic agriculture in California, which, she claims, used to be centred around sustainability ('farming in nature's image') but is now focussed on resource dependency ('farming off of nature's image'), dominated as it is by agro-food firms with their international marketing, reliance on fossil fuels and value-added processing. Organic certification agencies, operating in competition with each other, are compromised by their need to protect the interests of their fee-paying members. Standards, therefore, emphasise inputs rather than methods, and certification has become sufficiently costly to exclude small and poorly capitalised operations. Guthman suggests that, whereas organic food used to be a form of counter-cultural cuisine, it has now become 'yuppie chow' (Guthman 2003). Although organic agriculture still hides behind its counter-cultural image, it presides over poor labour conditions and the gendered implications of *slow* food (in terms of unpaid feminised labour) and *health* food (in terms of oppressive body norms). In this light, then, organic food systems work less to *demystify* global capitalism and more to add and capture value through *refetishising* the commodity.

This set of debates raises significant questions about the spatialities and ethicalities of the consumption of organic production. Some of these questions are contextual, for example relating to the predominant place of California in academic narratives about alternative food systems which inevitably reflect both different geographical contexts and localised imagined values. Other questions are processual, serving to deconstruct overly linear or binary narratives of counter-cultural – to – mainstreamed. Clearly there is a plethora of interesting ethical spaces between "culture" and "counter-culture" and between the stylised figures of the "capitalist businessman" and the

“ideological hippy”. We seek to move beyond and to destabilise these too often dichotomised ideas about organic food, and especially to deconstruct the perceived yawning gap between the supposedly "authentic" and ethical organic food which comes from small-scale, idyllic counter-cultural farms, and the supposedly "mainstream" and less-than-ethical organic food supposedly produced on industrial, corporate but environmentally responsible farms. Such a move is important for at least two reasons: first, to place in critical perspective recent populist accounts (for example, Fromartz 2006, Pollan 2006), which tend to lend succour to such dichotomies; and secondly to highlight the importance of regional-scale businesses which act as new value chains by seeking to incorporate and practice the values of environmental sustainability. These regional scale operations actually involve a multiplicity of scales. Far from being simply "local", Riverford seeks to source some produce internationally, relies on national level information technology and market research, acts regionally in terms of franchising and distribution, as well as relying on local farms for much of its produce. It is to the value chains which connect these scales that questions of ethics can be addressed; where the promotion of environmental and consumer health juxtaposes and overlaps with the needs of farmworkers, the interests of small farmers, diversity in agricultural practice, and the raising of political consciousness by the defetishisation of the commodity. The Riverford case belies any oversimplification of the ethics inherent in these complex networks, and offers a particular value chain from which to seek answers to significant questions such as, what do organic food networks try to do for us, and what good do they, or should they do for us?

The Case of Riverford Organic Vegetables

The empirical work for this paper was undertaken as part of a large research project – *Governing the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption*² – involving 10 discussion groups with residents of Bristol, a city in southwest England, and six case studies of organisations, discourses, and devices operating in the field of ethical consumption: the Trade Justice Movement, the Make Bristol a Fair Trade City Campaign, the role of print media in ethical consumption campaigning, Moral Fibre, Traidcraft, and Riverford Organic Vegetables. The project’s theoretical framework makes Riverford Organic Vegetables and similar box schemes look particularly interesting. The dominant model of ethics in much ethical consumption campaigning draws on deontology (theories of the right) and teleology (theories of the good) (Barnett et al 2005a). Such universal prescriptions are highly abstract, say little about motivation, neglect the background of resources and opportunities against which individuals act, and thus make overwhelming demands on ordinary people. At first look, box schemes would appear to escape this dominant model. The practical and material opportunities they offer consumers to participate in a form of ‘ethical’ consumption goes well beyond abstract principles and far-removed consequences. Instead, decisions to participate speak of and to issues of ethical motivation, the importance of relationships of care, and everyday forms of intervention in the resources and opportunities which form the architecture of ethical consumption.

These were the concerns with which we approached Riverford Organic Vegetables. Located in south-west England, Riverford received organic status from the Soil Association in 1986. For the next six years or so, owner Guy Watson sold relatively

small quantities of vegetables to his brother's farm shop, local health food stores, wholesalers, and supermarkets. UNIVEG, the farmers' co-operative through which Watson sold vegetables to the supermarkets, folded in 2004 after two of the major players – Sainsbury's and Waitrose – undertook 'supply chain rationalisation'. By this time, however, Riverford was less dependent on UNIVEG than most members. This is because, in 1992, Watson began delivering vegetable boxes door-to-door (thus bypassing the supermarkets). By the late 1990s, these boxes contained vegetables grown on the Riverford farm, and also vegetables grown on nine other farms in south-west England, all members of South Devon Organic Producers, a co-operative established in 1997 to share machinery, marketing, labour and technical expertise. The late 1990s were important years in Riverford's development. In 1998, Watson took the British Government to court over GM trials on a neighbouring farm. For this, Riverford received considerable media exposure. From 1999, somewhat informally, the relationship between Riverford and South Devon Organic Producers gradually changed: ten producers became one producer-marketer (Riverford) and nine straight producers. Today, Riverford acts as sole marketing agent for the co-operative. 70% of all vegetables boxed at Riverford come through the co-operative, approximately 50% of this figure from the Riverford farm itself. In addition, 15% come through local farmers outside of the co-operative, and 15% come from Southern Europe. In 2002, the box scheme accounted for 45% of all Riverford and co-operative sales. In 2003, this figure rose to 75%. At the time of writing, Riverford delivers approximately 50,000 boxes to 20,000 households every month – arguably the UK's largest organic vegetable supplier. After winning numerous previous awards (The Soil Association's Organic Business Person of the Year 2003, the Daily Express/British Franchise

Association Brand Builder of the Year 2003), Watson became BBC Radio 4 Farmer of the Year in November 2004.

The research for this paper involved corporate interviews (Schoenberger 1991) with Watson, his head of marketing, business development manager, warehouse manager, and management accountant, in addition to representatives from South Devon Organic Producers, the Soil Association, and RB Organic (a partner in River Nene Organic Vegetables – see below). It also involved analysis of Riverford-produced texts: the current business plan; reports from various consultants; staff newsletters; customer newsletters; market intelligence; marketing materials; and training materials. These texts were analysed using two complementary approaches. Drawing on the texts themselves, structural analysis was used to establish potential textual effects (Barthes 1977). Drawing on material from the corporate interviews, contextual analysis was used to establish actual textual effects as they emerge from text construction and use in particular settings (Miller 1997). The combination of corporate interviews with a variety of actors and also analysis of Riverford-produced texts enabled triangulation in the formulation of claims for this paper. These claims primarily refer to organic production and distribution as opposed to organic consumption. This is because the methodology of the broader research project from which the paper arises did not allow for research on consumers of Riverford Organic Vegetables in particular (although it did involve ten discussion groups with residents of different electoral wards within the city of Bristol about the subject of ethical consumption – see Malpass et al In Press). The paper contains a small number of speculations about organic consumption suggested by findings from these discussion groups and also the research on Riverford as an organic producer and distributor. But

these speculations serve to invite further work on organic consumption as it relates to the central claims of the paper, not least because the narratives and devices of producers and distributors are never passively received by consumers, of course, but are actively accepted, rejected and everything in between. The claims are also primarily about Riverford Organic Vegetables, which is taken to represent not so much generalised organic food networks as simply itself – an organic food network that operates in a way that calls into question various prevalent assumptions about the spaces and ethics of organic food. The first principle claim of the paper is that, in the case of Riverford, the space of organic food production and distribution is neither the small, local, counter-cultural farm nor the large, transnational, corporate firm.

The Spaces of Organic Food Production and Distribution

The idea of organic agriculture often conjures up images of small, local, counter-cultural farms, although as discussed above, the perceived reality often relates more to the growth of large transnational corporate firms. The trajectory of Riverford, unsurprisingly, is less linear and more complex than these ideas suggest. Riverford launched its box scheme in 1992. The stated purpose behind the scheme was to avoid the ‘villains’ of British agro-food – not the agro-food producer firms (apparently so dominant in California), but the supermarkets with their market dominance, discount prices, short-term contracts and lack of concern for food miles. Over the next decade, Riverford grew rapidly in both numbers of boxes delivered and the area over which they were delivered, such that, in 2001, Watson began selling franchises for box delivery across the south of England. Yet the strategy was always to occupy ‘the

middle ground' in the box scheme market (*Business Plan 2000-05*), placing the business somewhere between small, local, farm-based schemes of variable quality and large, national, marketing-based schemes that import produce, deliver by courier and charge high prices to cover these costs. So, in recent years, Watson and his team have begun looking at ways to *expand-without-expanding*; to sell and promote organic food (and therefore to participate in the 'mainstreaming' of organic food) without becoming a national scheme in which the original Riverford farm finds itself marginalised. The business model arrived at imagines a national network of box schemes sharing market research and information technology with each other (since economies of scale exist more in these areas and less in production and packaging) but centred around different farms and delivery areas, each with its own distinct character. Thus, in 2004, Riverford embarked on a joint venture with RB Organic (a division of Produce World with growing and packing operations in the East Midlands): River Nene Organic Vegetables. This may be the first of many joint ventures. The long-term plan is to advance the Riverford business model and brand across the UK while simultaneously retreating back into the South West as producer and distributor.

The reasons given for this 'retreat' involve both the minimisation of food miles and the need to maintain relationships of 'connection' between farm and market. At first sight, this aligns with the assumed characteristics of alternative food networks: under the conditions of a risk society (Beck 1992), with increasing distance between consumers and producers, consumers have become anxious about their food and producers have responded with shortened and simplified commodity chains. However, Watson uses the term 'connection' in a particular way. Describing The

Field Kitchen, a new visitor centre at Riverford farm, he says ‘It will be, as I say, a kind of embodiment of what the business is about. So that sort of connection that, with where the food comes from – the enthusiasm, the joy, the sharing it’ (interview 08/09/04). Reflecting on the Riverford business, he says ‘A central part of Riverford is making the connection between farm and kitchen. That’s so important to me when, like me, you believe the pleasure of food is greater when you know how and where it’s grown’ (*The Sunday Times*, 29/09/02, Business p17). ‘Connection’ here, then, refers to enthusiasm, joy and sharing; to the pleasure of food, derived (in part) from technical and geographical knowledge of localised production. As opposed to anxiety and the management of risk, connection refers to enthusiasm and the construction of pleasure. These connections reflect an ethical framework centred less on risk and more on ideas of ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper, forthcoming) in which sustainable consumption demands a process of seduction, the first step of which involves naming alternative desires and modes of fulfilment.

In these terms, then, the space of Riverford is neither the small, local, counter-cultural farm nor the large, transnational, corporate firm. Rather, simultaneously, it is the *national* network (the scale at which market research and information technology operate), the *regional* distribution system (the scale at which distribution operates), and the *local* farm (the scale of connection with localised production). This multifaceted spatial framework has been constructed for good reason: for organic food to be constructed as fresh, seasonal, and (therefore) tasty, ‘connection’ is required at both the local and regional scale. All of these scales are constructed; none of them are essentially good or bad, right or wrong. Indeed, we want to insist that the complex ethics of organic food do not map readily onto these “given” scales of the

local, regional and national. Over time, the spaces of Riverford have changed with multiple impacts and implications. Consider, for example, the interests of small producers. In some ways, they look threatened by Riverford's development. Originally, South Devon Organic Producers sold vegetables to the supermarkets. Now, effectively, they sell vegetables to Riverford. What the supermarkets once were to Riverford (the sole and therefore powerful marketing agent), to a certain extent, Riverford now is to South Devon Organic Producers. At times, in various documents, Riverford almost sounds like those very organisations it sought to by-pass in establishing the box scheme. In Riverford's *Business Plan 2000-05*, the goal 'to be profitable' relates to the following strategy: 'to reduce costs and seek efficiencies in production, distribution and administration'. In the same document, one item under 'aims and objectives' is 'to encourage the co-op to specialise' (to encourage farmers to depend on just one crop, as if depending on just one marketing agent isn't risky enough). In a staff newsletter (March 2003), we find this response to customer complaints about bruised potatoes and 'diddly' carrots: 'The co-op growers have been told that next year we will not accept some of the potatoes and carrots that we have graded this year'.

In other ways, however, the interests of small producers look well-served by Riverford's development. A consultant's report produced at the time of the joint venture with RB Organic gives us a sense of the business culture at Riverford. Expansion must be 'for the benefit of farmers and the world at large. Not just avarice and megalomania'. It must rest on two pillars: 'the right tangibles' (that is, flavoursome vegetables at affordable prices); and the right ultimate purpose – the River Nene project should be 'a vehicle to make the world a better place' for staff,

customers, and suppliers (most immediately), and for ‘people and planet’ (more broadly). ‘Issues relevant to the business’ must include flavour, but also diet (school dinners, education), environment (packaging, airfreight, food miles) and support for small producers. Given their current conditions of existence, small producers mostly welcome the attention of Riverford. Chris Miller, a member of South Devon Organic Producers, makes more money through Riverford than he ever did through the wholesalers (interview 19/10/04). In addition, he is happy to specialise since organic farming demands long rotations anyway. In 2004, concerned about the potential impact of internal growth on external growers in the South West, Riverford conducted telephone interviews with ‘rival’ producers and marketing agents. Though hardly scientific or independent, the most common finding of this small study was that, rather than putting external growers out of business, internal growth at Riverford serves to raise awareness of organic produce and thereby expand the general market for everyone. There are also other interests to consider – those of farm workers, consumers, non-human natures and so on. For Riverford’s management accountant, business growth has led to increased capacity which in turn has led to improved environmental and labour standards, from formal training opportunities to a subsidised staff canteen (interview 18/11/04). But this study is no impact assessment. Our purpose is not to accept and then tally assumed ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ against the trajectory of Riverford – important as this might be. Rather, our purpose is to acknowledge and examine these assumed ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ themselves – to address the question: what are the ethics of organic food?

The Ordinary Ethics of Organic Food Production and Distribution

Foucault defines ethics as nothing more grand than the rather mundane activity of constructing a life by negotiating practical choices about personal conduct (Barnett *et al* 2005b). As part of the wider research project on ethical consumption, we have investigated how when people talk about the ethics of consumption they predominantly refer to these ‘ordinary’ ethics – caring for the family, caring about value and taste, linking health to everyday choices, cross-cutting concerns between the values of the workplace and the values of the home, and so on – rather than about strongly held ideological or spiritual blueprints for action (see Cloke *et al*, forthcoming). People involved with Riverford Organic Vegetables appear similarly concerned with these ‘ordinary’ ethics, rather than with grand designs of environmental sustainability. So the category of ordinary ethics – and those of diverse ethics and graspable ethics – emerges from *both* theoretical framing (as in the case of Foucault above) *and* the empirical material presented in this paper. As such, the impact of ordinary ethics transcends local, regional and national scales. When people involved with Riverford talk about the organisation – its origins, its achievements, its future – most often and fervently, they talk about providing good food (quality food, tasty food) and doing that well (at affordable prices, by honest means). For Watson, good food is a family tradition (interview 08/09/04): ‘My mother was, her angle on it all was, she was a fantastic cook. Great sort of interest in food... So, five children, we all grew up with a strong interest in food. And indeed, today, four of us [run] food-based businesses on the farm’. Riverford works to promote this tradition beyond the family (*ibid.*):

I became more and more interested in food and cooking and whatever, and, you know, experimenting in different ways of growing vegetables and preparing vegetables. And I found that I actually really loved doing that, to the point where it became a sort of obsession really. And so that became another sort of prime motivator: of actually wanting to share that enthusiasm with people.

‘The company mission is to “harvest, store and sell produce in a way that provides freshness and the best flavour as well as the best appearance”’ (*Franchisee Pack*). One company goal is ‘to be kitchen-led’ (*Business Plan 2000-05*), for which certain ‘keywords’ are important – ‘flavour’, ‘enthusiastic about food’, ‘campaigning on food issues’, ‘food as a cultural issue’ – along with certain strategies: an ‘enhanced quality role’; and The Field Kitchen (the new visitor centre).

This emphasis on providing good food and doing that well does not mean that more abstract concerns – the environment, the community, development – are entirely absent from the empirical material. Indeed, one company goal is to be ‘environmentally sensitive’ and ‘community focused’ (*Business Plan 2000-2005*), for which ‘keywords’ include ‘nutrition’ and ‘education’. By various means – including the trailer rides and food stalls of Pumpkin Day each October – Riverford raises money for both Oxfam and the Kulika Trust (promoting sustainable farming in Uganda). Nevertheless, relatively ordinary concrete concerns – quality food, personal health – born out of practical experience (often within the family), dominate their narratives about being involved with organics. Watson describes his introduction to organic farming in the following way (interview 08/09/04):

I just didn’t particularly want to use chemicals. I mean, I had spent a lot of my time in my teens, I suppose, and early twenties, spraying the corn that we grew on the farm. I had made myself pretty ill a few times. I just really didn’t like handling the chemicals. And maybe there

was a kind of deep-seated – you know, guts rather than brains – sort of feeling that this was not the right way to be treating the land. But I can't say that I was particularly consciously aware of that ... And I suppose the commitment to organic farming from a kind of environmental point of view and from a food safety point of view came sort of later. I suppose another sort of reason why I had been growing things organically was because I just, you know, you have to develop your own, the problems are different, and you have to find your own sort of solutions. There were no blueprints for how to do things organically, and I quite like paddling my own canoe and doing things my own way, and so that kind of suited me.

This narrative contrasts with that explored earlier in the paper in which local farms lose a sense of identity in their fall from counter-culture to conventional capitalism. Indeed, there is evidence in the Riverford story of a gain rather than a loss in environmental sensitivity. Watson began organic farming, he says, for reasons of personal health and independence. If anything, he became *more* conscious of environmental and food safety issues as Riverford grew over time. In 1998, he took the UK government to court over neighbouring GM trials with financial assistance from Friends of the Earth. Even so, he maintains a certain distance between Riverford and 'the environmental movement' (ibid.):

To be honest, I don't think, they're just not organisations that I feel comfortable with, which may seem weird. They're just rather sort of dowdy. And my father, who is much harder, much more of a sort of campaigner than me, and I often think that he's waiting for the world to come to an end so that it will prove him right, sort of thing, which I kind of, I don't know, that's the sort of message I'm getting from Friends of the Earth ... Oh, we've had a bit of a relationship with *The Ecologist* recently, but I feel exactly the same way about them. You know, I feel quite uncomfortable with their sort of projection of, you know, displaying organic farming as being, you know, they did a thing on organic farming and the Slow Food Movement, which they got involved in as well, and they had pictures of peasants walking up hillsides carrying, you know, things of grapes or whatever. And this was, you know, it was just sort of 'Piss off! That peasant couldn't wait to get a tractor to put the...'. You know, it was all about sort of harking back to some golden age or something and of, you know, everything that is modern is bad. And, you know, that's kind of what I

get from, and it just sort of makes me want to walk in the other direction.

He positions environmentalism as often pessimistic, backward-looking and exclusive. At the same time, he positions Riverford as inclusive, modern and engaged with the lighter side of life (ibid.): ‘I want to make it [organic food] accessible to everybody. I want it to be affordable. I want it to be easy. I want it to be fun. I don’t want it to be a guilt, you know, people coming to us on some sort of guilt trip or whatever’.

So, we would argue that ‘ordinary’ ethics remain dominant in the case of Riverford Organic Vegetables. And this claim – that the ethics of organic food production and distribution are ordinary ethics – is important for two reasons. First, it is important because ordinary ethics are rarely taken seriously in debates about organic food *consumption* in which the key question posed to potentially ethical consumers is ‘what ought I to do?’ Here, consequentialist and deontological ethics (see Singer 1997) have sought to understand those forms of altruism which enable consumers to overcome their self-interest, instead valorising the interests of others – other people and other natures. Rather, forms of ordinary virtue ethics prioritise the awakening of enlightened self-interest in order to care for the other (Barnett et al 2005a), particularly through everyday habits and practices that permit virtues to be learned. The question here – ‘what kind of person do I strive to be?’ – seems highly relevant to understanding consumption of organic foods. Secondly, because ordinary ethics are played out in concrete and practical ways, and do not rely on grand frameworks of motivation, they make fewer demands of the consumer. Choosing to order a regular box of organic vegetables does not demand a motivational commitment to living a wholly sustainable lifestyle. Precise motivation may well be ordinary – consumers

like the idea, the taste, the feel, the wholesomeness of organic produce, especially when conveniently delivered to the doorstep – but the aggregate impact accords with more strategic ethical objectives as expressed in this instance by campaigning organisations such as Friends of the Earth, namely the mainstreaming of organic food.

The Diverse Ethics of Organic Food Production and Distribution

We further argue that the ethics associated with producing and consuming organic food reflect an often complex diversity. Here we draw on two theoretical strands. The first is cultural economy (Amin and Thrift, 2004) which recognises that the economy does not exist as a discrete sphere of activity dictated by its own rules and imperatives. Rather, economy, society and culture are closely interconnected, ‘woven together as a single and inseparable fabric’ (p.x). This weave draws on different historical traditions, ranging from Adam Smith’s theories of moral sentiment to studies (for example by Benjamin, Simmel and Bataille) of how capital accumulation is fuelled by obsession and enchantment. Critically, Amin and Thrift emphasise that economic activity, although loosely definable as the pursuit of prosperity, represents the pursuit of multiple contemporaneous goals, and can be ordered by passions (desire and fear), moral sentiments (work hard, be honest, trust people), knowledge (understood as learnt culture – conventions, habits and so on) and disciplines (accountancy and similar technologies).

The second relevant theoretical strand draws on Warde’s (2004) *theories of practice* approach to consumption. For Warde, theories of practice attend to both *praxis* – the whole of human action (as opposed to mere thinking) – and *praktik* – a routinised type

of behaviour that consists of different interconnected elements: bodily activities; mental activities; things and their use; background knowledge (know-how); and emotion or desire (motivational knowledge). This highlights the importance both of practice as a coordinated entity – a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed network of doings and sayings – and practice as performance – the carrying out of doings and sayings. A theories of practice approach to consumption focuses on practices as they create wants and steer consumption. An example used by Warde is the practice of supporting a football club as it creates wants for a season ticket or a replica shirt and steers consumption accordingly. In this way, a theories of practice approach frames consumption as one moment in almost every practice and directs research away from individual choice, insatiable wants, and personal expression, towards appropriate conduct, instituted conventions and social competence.

These two perspectives pose some key questions for organic food networks. What diverse practices steer consumption *and production* of organic food? What passions, moral sentiments, knowledge and disciplines order such activity? Interviews with Riverford staff provide us with some fascinating glimpses of such diversity in practice. For example, the Business Development Manager pursues his commitment to quality food through Riverford, and also his career in marketing (interview 18/11/04):

I'm not the most dark-green, tree-hugging, CND member, but I, you know, I had, the basis of my background is, you know, I was committed to quality food and how people produced and how people bought their food. So that's what initially attracted me. And I wanted to get into marketing.

When asked what makes for a successful year at Riverford, the Warehouse Manager responds by talking about growth, figures and targets – by talking about conventions and disciplines (interview 18/11/04):

For me, just, first of all, meeting the growth is an achievement in itself ... If I can sit back and think, well, we've supplied 22 franchises with, you know, sort of 16,000 boxes a week, then that's something that we can be proud of ... [F]or me, what's successful and what's not is solely about meeting our production targets, if you like, and keeping quality good, staff retention, all those sort of day to day things.

According to Rob Haward, recently of the Soil Association, now of RB Organic (with some critical distance from the Soil Association), a passion for health drives the majority of Soil Association employees (interview 15/10/04): 'healthy soil, healthy people and healthy environment'. As for Chris Miller of South Devon Organic Producers, he converted to organic production, he says, when 'seriously worried' about biodiversity (interview 19/10/04): 'I think my basic motive was environmental. I was seriously worried about the bird population disappearing ... It's just really worrying that the diversity that was there when I was a child has gone'. Though he adds: 'The importance of making a living can't be overstated'. Finally, beyond the specific evidence from Riverford, emerging evidence suggests that organic food networks might be ordered, at least in part, through practices of care within the family. According to retailers, for example, four out of five babies are now fed with organic produce (*The Guardian*, 20/11/04, Jobs and Money, p5).

The ethics of organic food production and distribution are diverse, then, and this diversity is important because it threatens network stability and durability. Put simply, how can involvement with organic food successfully constitute one moment within so

many different practices: promoting quality food; pursuing a career; growing a business; promoting health in various ways; earning a living; caring for family members? The answer is that certain devices work to manage diversity within organic food networks, from staff committee meetings and farm visits to various print media and the vegetable boxes themselves. For example, in newsletters written by Watson and read by Riverford staff, Watson engages with that ‘growth versus purity’ tension familiar to students of organic food:

In the last newsletter I said that we had been selected as a finalist in the Express sponsored ‘brand builder of the year award’. This month we heard that we had won. It all seems a long way from farming but is recognition of how successful the marketing team has been in getting out and marketing the boxes. For those of you who may feel that this is Riverford joining the corporate world, I can assure you that we will never join the corporate crowd. Riverford will always be about getting people excited about good food. It just happens that this is proving to be the basis of a successful brand. The more successful it is the more we can use the profits it generates to do good things like provide good staff facilities, show schools around, recycle our packaging and supporting local farmers.

Staff Newsletter, June 2001

[Regarding The Field Kitchen, we] will try and make it all organic and get it registered with the Soil Association as such. Jane (the chef) and I probably have this further down our list of priorities than many staff and are concerned about the bureaucracy involved. There are only three registered organic restaurants in the UK; probably for good reasons. Affordability is a key issue for me. I really do not want the place to be the preserve of the wealthy. If we can do it without pushing the prices up too much or driving ourselves mad we will.

Staff Newsletter, March 2004

In these two extracts, diverse goals are set in opposition: brand building and farming; ‘the corporate world’ and ‘getting people excited about good food’; affordability and organic certification. The effect of this is to demonstrate awareness and understanding of concerns held by some Riverford workers. The extracts also contain assurances and

suggestions that serve to maintain worker commitment: commercial success is almost incidental to ‘getting people excited about good food’; and commercial success should be viewed in terms of expanded capacity to do ‘good things’.

In marketing materials and customer newsletters, that favourite concern of commentators (and geographers in particular) – connection or reconnection – is an important theme. Marketing materials tell us that Riverford vegetables are ‘UK grown – 80 per cent from our South Devon fields’. They tell us that Riverford is ‘a family business committed to getting produce from farm to kitchen table by the most direct route’. As argued above, however, connection in the case of Riverford is less about managing anxiety and more about constructing pleasure. On registering with Riverford, customers receive a welcome booklet containing the following paragraph:

We are what we eat and it is important to feel a connection with, and a trust in our food that is denied by modern farming and retailing. The sharing of food prepared from the best quality ingredients is one of my greatest pleasures. This excitement is all the greater when you know how and where the vegetables are grown. Our vegetable box scheme allows us to share this enthusiasm through a direct link from the farm to your table. I hope that through your connection with the farm you will feel almost as though they came from your own garden, without the work.

In part, this construction of pleasure rests on disseminated knowledge:

Rhubarb is the most extraordinary vegetable. Every Autumn it dies back and if you were to dig up the root you would find a seemingly lifeless, brown and rotten mass resembling a very decayed old tree stump. Yet magically, every spring, out of the decay emerge the most vigorous, thrusting buds which, on reaching the surface, burst into the gigantic leaves and the fleshy stems of rhubarb. They can be harvested through the spring and summer, but we normally stop picking in July to give the plant a chance to recharge its roots.

The root was actually the original reason for growing the crop. In China, 4000 years ago, it was dried and used as a laxative. Marco Polo brought it to Europe, and by the 16th century it had required a reputation as a cure for venereal disease. Not a very appetising history perhaps, and it was not until the 18th century that it became popular as a vegetable, first in France and later in Britain. Recently, it has enjoyed renewed popularity as a savoury accompaniment to meat, particularly pork. Personally, I like it stewed on my muesli in the morning.

Customer Newsletter, April 2004

In these two extracts, movement is rapid from brief mention of health, trust and risk to more substantial and explicit assertions about the pleasures of sharing food cooked with quality ingredients of knowable geographical origins (the Riverford farm), historical origins (its use as a laxative in China, for example), qualities revealed in production (vigorous, thrusting, gigantic, fleshy) and qualities revealed in consumption ('a savoury accompaniment'). In these print media, then, language works less to *defetishise* the commodity and more to *refetishise* the commodity – something identified in other studies of organic and also fair trade networks (Guthman 2004, Goodman M 2004, Bryant and Goodman 2004). In these and other studies, commentators tend to assume that defetishisation is *essentially* desirable and refetishisation is *essentially* undesirable. But surely defetishisation is desirable when the purpose is to raise political consciousness, and refetishisation might be desirable if the purpose is to move organic food into the mainstream (with certain ends in mind such as biodiversity or consumer health)?

The Graspable Ethics of Organic Food Consumption

The rationale for investigating Riverford's organic box scheme was at least in part because a box of fruit and vegetables delivered to the doorstep seemed to represent an unremarkable yet potentially significant 'device' for the encouragement of ethical

consumption. The importance of the device is as a practical bridge between the governing of consumption and the governing of the consuming self (Barnett et al, 2005b). Broad governmental or non-governmental regulation of norms and values in consumption will often not chime with how people govern their own consuming behaviours and identities *unless* there is a connecting opportunity which creates a pathway to participation that brings together the interests concerned. Riverford's organic box scheme serves as just such a device, connecting a regulated, certified and campaigned-over group of foodstuffs with the ordinary ethics of consumption practices. Box schemes do not necessarily tell people to behave ethically, to follow right principles or to calculate good consequences. However, they do facilitate, enable and make possible ethical action.

Such ethical 'devices' can take many forms [and occur at many scales](#), but in this case there are significant materialities involved which contribute to the practices of consumption concerned. The box itself – constructed from recycled and recyclable materials – has its own material and symbolic presence. Its material presence is relevant because it arrives, is used for storage, is emptied and is put out on the doorstep ready for collection. This cyclical presence means that the box itself is regularly moved, carefully used and materially handled as part of the practice of consuming organic food. The symbolic presence of the box offers a range of inclusivities and portrayals of value and virtue. These range from the visibility of the box on the doorstep (announcing membership of the scheme, demonstrating the consumption of organic food, and maybe even signifying environmentalist credentials), to the visibility of the box in the kitchen, speaking to family, friends and guests about both practical/ordinary and political/ethical values and virtues.

The materiality of the box is equalled or surpassed by that of the food that arrives and is stored in it. Loose in the box, covered with dirt, the vegetables speak of hybridity, biodiversity and caring environmentalism. Held in the hand, chemical-free but rarely supermarket-pristine, the fleshly naturalness of the food is good to linger over and savour. Cleaned, cooked, and served, the vegetables speak of good, healthy, natural produce with special taste, and are appropriate for incorporation into the body (Roe, 2006). At each point, ethics becomes embodied, performed, mingled with diverse emotions and desires. The food becomes the centre of new culinary practices, inviting the use of different recipes and serving methods – even puzzlement over how possibly to use some previously unfamiliar vegetable. In these and other ways, the materialities of box and contents become ingrained in routine practices and performances, and in so doing a form of practical ordinary ethics becomes literally graspable. Of course, unacceptable materialities can have negative impacts – leftover content or degraded food quality create unsatisfactory material presences and invoke emotions associated with waste, non-desire and inedibility.

At Riverford, the importance of box and vegetable is well recognised. Of the new visitor centre, Watson has this to say (interview 08/09/04):

I think I probably have to be careful not to over-blow its importance. It's very important to me personally. In a sort of business context, I'm not sure if it has the same ... You know, the most important thing every week is that they get the right stuff in the boxes, you know, the quality is right, balance of ingredients.

During 2005, the marketing team at Riverford undertook market research in the form of questionnaires, focus groups and a customer panel. They were interested in little

more than what customers think of the box and its contents (size, variety, quality and so on). According to Riverford's Marketing Manager, this is because 'success' (stability, durability) – measured by the number of people joining and leaving the scheme – rests much more on these things than newsletters and marketing materials (interview 18/11/04).

Conclusions

At the start of this paper we outlined two portrayals of alternative food networks, each suggesting inherent spatial and ethical characteristics that can be applied to organic food production and consumption. In this way, organic food can be linked with shortened commodity chains, localised production and consumption, environmental sustainability, and the management of food-associated risk. Alternatively, organics can be caught up with unreflexive localisms, with supposedly counter-cultural production being infiltrated and appropriated by mainstream capitalist concerns and processes geared towards young-urban-professional consumption. Investigation of Riverford Organic Vegetables suggests neither a small counter-cultural farm nor a large, transnational, corporate firm. Riverford has been neither infiltrated nor appropriated, and it has by no means suffered a fall from purity through some kind of translation of localised heroics to mainstream bully-capitalism. Instead, we suggest that Riverford has deployed particular spatial frameworks and particular ethical concerns as it has developed over the years.

Spatially, Riverford has engineered what Brenner (2001) has termed a 'scalar fix', that is it has designed its operations to enable 'expansion without expansion' in such a

way that the ‘local’ [and its attendant ethicalities](#) can be emphasised over a broader spatial frame of operations. The space of Riverford, then, combines national networks of research and information technology with regional distribution systems. However, the key scalar fix is to ensure that appropriate connections are maintained and represented with localised production. To some extent this involves an impression of connectedness between producers and consumers which suggests a re-embeddedness in local ecologies and production systems. Yet, the connectedness aimed for by Riverford transcends this apparently simple idea of practical relationships built on proximity alone. Rather, Riverford’s connectedness with consumers emphasises the pleasurable enjoyment of food that is only partially prompted by knowledge of localised production. Although expansion of the business has taken place, awareness of environmental responsibility has increased rather than faded through that development. The selling of organic food has been mainstreamed, yet the framework of franchises ensures not only a circumnavigation of market-dominating supermarkets, but also the introduction of new ‘locals’ into the scalar fix. Accordingly, it is difficult and unwise to superimpose any generalised correlation between spatialisation and ethics on this particular organic food network.

Portrayals of alternative food networks tend to assume not only that organic food networks try to uphold certain right principles and ensure certain good outcomes, but also that these networks *should* try to uphold certain right principles and ensure certain good outcomes. Our argument here is not that they don’t, nor that they shouldn’t, but that the ethics concerned are far more complex than this suggests. Riverford’s underlying ethical objectives include making the world a better place, but are principally focussed on producing flavoursome vegetables at affordable prices.

Watson began the organic business because of health concerns about handling chemicals, but became increasingly environmentally sensitive over time. Yet Riverford should not be constructed as some kind of response to broad consumer anxiety about health or environment; the priority has been to develop a sense of the pleasure of organic food. Riverford's ethics might therefore be regarded as ordinary ethics rather than grand ethical designs; they are constituted in and through a variety of practices, passions, moral sentiments, knowledges and disciplines that in turn have ordered Riverford's organic food network [over a variety of scales](#). As such the network is inherently unstable, and requires stabilising devices, from print media to the box delivery scheme itself.

These vegetable boxes offer consumers a graspable device with which to engage with the ethics of organic food. Although this paper has not dealt directly with the consumers of Riverford produce, we suggest that the delivery of a Riverford box is less about forging new consumer subjectivities and more about a practice which mobilises a diverse range of motivations, incentives and desires into a larger-scale form of collective action. In this way, individual dispositions are worked up, governed, and regulated, but these dispositions, as Hobson (2006, forthcoming) points out, require conversion via situation-specific ethical moments which evoke and bring in from the periphery an awareness of ethical facets of the self – however ordinary. Thus, environmental responsibility will often constitute the acceptance of a small-scale and limited ethical device – such as engaging with Riverford's box scheme which enables a practical getting-in-touch with wider ethics through the everyday practices and materialities of consumption. In this way, the pleasure of organic food is

translated from the Riverford network and becomes mobilised as a concrete and virtuous practice of ethical consumption.

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