

Paper title

Sustainable diets or fearful diets?

Trying to make sense of organic food consumption in a polluted world

1. Introduction

In most affluent societies around the globe, organic food is becoming a permanent feature of some people's shopping carts and kitchen cupboards (Willer and Lernoud 2019). This trend may be viewed positively if one considers organics to be a more sustainable form of agriculture than the resource-intensive one of the past seventy years (IAASTD 2009). The same could be said of the apparent spread of organic food values. However, these rosy assessments don't tell the whole picture. While the consumption of organic food began as an expression of environmental values (Belasco 2006), the relationship between the two has changed considerably over time, with organics expanding well beyond environmentalism (Reed 2010). This change has tracked the increased conventionalization of the organic food sector (Guthman 2004), but it has also come about as a result of new sensibilities toward the planet. Rather than protecting the environment from people's harmful actions, consuming organics today seems to be about protecting people from a harmful environment (Szasz 2007). Underlying this shift in perception is the acknowledgement that most of our surroundings are now irreversibly polluted, from those that produce the food we eat to those where we spend most of our time – our cities, workplaces, and even our homes (Curson and Clark 2004). As such, the phenomenon of organic food consumption may be seen as an expression of life on a "synthetic planet" (Casper 2003) and in a new "Anthropocene society" (Palsson et al. 2013). This paper reflects critically on these issues by drawing on ethnographic data collected in Italy.

2. Methods

The paper is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork carried out throughout Italy since 2006. The two main areas of research are Palermo in Sicily and Turin in Piedmont. Part of this fieldwork includes the use of more formal data-collection methods, such as household research, work in health food stores and on organic farms, and semi-structured interviews (carried out mostly with women, often married and with children).

3. Results

The paper argues that people who eat organic foods often do so to avoid food they consider "polluted" in a sense that is specific to the organic phenomenon.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Food "pollution" is usually interpreted either subjectively or objectively. In the former sense, substances that go against religious precepts, such as pork or cow meat, contaminate food. In the latter, substances that are scientifically proven to be harmful above certain thresholds, like agrochemical residues, dioxins and radionuclides, make food dangerous. From the perspective of the organic food phenomenon, however, polluted food is something different—it is nonorganic (conventional) food. This construct is a combination of the subjective and the objective. According to it, conventional food is polluted in at least three ways. First, it contains substances that are scientifically proven to be harmful, *regardless* of scientifically determined thresholds; second, substances over whose harmfulness there is still debate (e.g. glyphosate; GMOs); and third, it is the product of agricultural and commercial practices that violate non-religious moral choices, like genetic modification, oil-based farming, concentrated animal feeding operations, etc. Only this latter sense may be openly identified with a proactive strategy of caring, and thus classified as part of a sustainable diet. The other two illustrate instead a defensive attitude toward the environment that raises questions about what kind of vision can—and should—drive the expansion of organic food consumption, even when one considers it a form of implicit or "quiet" sustainability (Smith and Jehlička 2013).

5. References

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