

# What causes change in food consumption? Buying organic food in Denmark and not in Norway

## 1 Introduction

Change in consumption practices receives a lot of attention in debates on food. Two lines of discussions are dominant: one, regulatory and normative addresses how change in the population's food consumption practices can be brought about – either for the sake of health, for environmental sustainability, for food quality, for gastronomy, etc. The other line addresses which changes have taken place in consumption patterns, what are their consequences and causes? Empirical studies about change are frequent within dietary studies, but the focus for these studies is on documenting changing food intake or nutrition – and they rarely address social causes of the reported changes.

Sociological theories about social change typically describe drivers behind change on a macro level. In contrast, sociological studies of food consumption are often micro-level studies of food consumption in specific population groups or settings, often limited to what goes on in the private sphere. This makes it difficult to link observations of what people do in their everyday lives to societal processes of change, especially for processes that are not directly associated with the family or with the household institution as such. We are here thinking of for example changes in the modes of governance and in economic institutions. We should explore *‘how consumers’ desires for goods are socially constructed - partly through industry-fostered changes in cultural models and strategic practices of marketing (“supply”), and partly through changing demographics, shifting means of self-expression and new social practices (“demand”)* (Zukin and Maguire 2004). Food consumption is a good case for how to study processes of social change, because, on the one hand, it is so important and integrated in our everyday lives and wellbeing and, on the other hand, meanings and activities related to food are so strongly connected with and dependent on normative discourses and what goes on in other societal arenas. There is a fairly well-known tradition in sociology for doing that, but this is in our opinion not given very much attention in empirical studies today.

To illustrate this point, we present a small empirical case, namely the emergence of organic food consumption in Denmark and Norway. The question is why organic consumption is so much higher in Denmark than in Norway? The large differences in level of consumption require, we think, explanations that are neither to be found in the character or meaning of contemporary eating in Scandinavia – nor in macro processes of modernisation linked to individualisation, globalisation and risks. We point to the need of understanding changes in household dealings with food in connection with changes in *concrete interrelations* between households, markets and politics.

## 2 The sociology of food

Important contributions within the sociology of food starting to emerge in the 70ies implied a critical distance from the dominant idea of 'economic man', which sees human action as the result of isolated individuals' self-interested decisions. They also represented a critique of 'food choice' found in popular psychological models, assuming norms, values and identity formation as matters of individual priorities. This implied a shift in focus from food acquisition in terms of individual purchasing choices towards the use of food (i.e. cooking and eating) in various settings. The meal was seen as the key event, and numerous analyses of the home and family arena have focused on the meanings of meals, how norms around meals are linked to gender relations, to norms about family life, the socialisation of children etc. The strength of much of this research lay in the analyses of the meanings of food, the role of food in identity formation, social distinctions, the symbolism around meals, and how meals are linked to social interaction in the household particularly around food preparation.

Many have suggested that class distinctions are increasingly being replaced by more individualised lifestyles. Mennell asserted that "Very broadly speaking, the increasing interdependence and more equal balances of power between social classes has been reflected in more equal distribution of foodstuffs, which in turn has been associated with somewhat greater similarity of cuisine, and also with less extreme differences between festival or banquet food and everyday eating, and with greater evenness of control of appetite." In other words, there is a process of "diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties" (Mennell 1985), 322). Fischler went further in suggesting that the social regulation of eating is looser today, with more individualised eating, less social sanctions, stronger reliance on own judgements and self discipline, and, following from that, more anxiety and uncertainty. This process was captured in his notion of 'gastro-anomie' (Fischler 1988), which, by referring directly to Durkheim, indicated a process of de-institutionalisation rather than the emergence of new institutional structures. In response to Mennell, however, Warde has maintained that the contemporary phase of consumer culture has become obsessed with variety and choice, tending to obscure underlying continuities in food practice (Warde 1997, 179).

A number of recent contributions from the sociology of food have redirected focus from the meanings of food and meals to what people do in relation to food. Key concepts are habits, routines, the ordinariness of consumption, putting less emphasis on discursive meanings and identity. One important development is the suggested use of theories of practice, understanding consumption as embedded in sets of practices, with practices constituted outside the individual (Warde 2005). This notion of practices can account for both social order (emerging from the coordination and the norms that a practice represents) and individuality (differentiation and performance within a practice) (Schatzki et al. 2001). Practices have a trajectory or path of development, a history. The substantive forms that practices take will always be conditional upon the institutional arrangements characteristic of time, space and social context. In the area of food, attention is then directed towards menu planning, food preparation, and conduct of meals in different social contexts, which also form an important background for the selection of specific products in a shopping situation (Kjærnes and Holm 2007).

Contributions from the sociology of food have tended to focus on the arena of private life, the household, and the family, with some extensions, such as eating at work or eating out. How private life is interconnected with other societal arenas and institutions, questions of power, interdependencies and responsibilities, often remain unclear. In principle, the introduction of theories of practice opens up for such interrelations, but the concept of practice may risk to maintain attention towards separate areas of practice. Interconnections with other societal arenas and institutions remain diffuse and it is not easy to capture how changes in such arenas influence consumption, nor how food consumption practices and people in their capacity as consumers may impact on such processes.

### **3 Food provisioning and changing consumption**

There is no lack of contributions addressing changes in food production systems. Some of these contributions point to distinct effects on food consumption. One important book of this kind is Sidney Mintz' *Sweetness and Power* from 1985, in which the Anglo-American preference for sweetness is associated with the growth in colonial slave-based sugar production and the global trade with sugar (Mintz 1985). Similar food 'biographies' from within political economy, sociology and anthropology, have analysed the use of particular foods such as salt, tomatoes, cod and corn in the light of specific material, economic and political conditions. A more general presentation of how production systems influence consumption has been developed within political economy by e.g. Ben Fine (Fine et al. 1996). A shared understanding in these contributions is that food consumption is seen as representing a passive sphere of re-production, the development of which is mainly a reflection of changes going on in the productive sphere.

This relatively passive understanding of the sphere of consumption is also reflected in *The McDonaldization of Society*, where Ritzer uses the characteristics of the organisation of the McDonald chain as mirroring societal change, being reflected even in the reproductive sphere of eating (Ritzer 1993). In recent years, we have seen a proliferation of publications addressing the politics of food. One example is *Consuming Interests*. Here, and in other contributions, changes in food distribution, such as "supermarketization" and global supply chains, shifting powers from farmers and agriculture to large actors within manufacturing and retailing are discussed (Marsden et al. 2000; Harvey et al. 2003).

New forms of product development, new ways of selling of food, and new marketing strategies have produced completely new conditions for food purchase. However, studies of local food and food quality, earlier dominated by productivist perspectives, are increasingly discussed with reference even to expectations and responsibilities of people as buyers and eaters of food. Contributions such as Montanari's *Food is Culture* and Morgan, Marsden and Murdoch's *Worlds of Food* (Montanari 2006; Morgan et al. 2006) address not only the relation between production and consumption but also link to discourses on taste, gastronomy and identity.

Yet, the 'consumer' is still a 'buyer'. The distance to everyday routines remains and people's welcoming or resistance is first of all a matter of purchase rather than collective mobilisation and political discourse. Against the view that transformations are thus assumed to push food

consumption towards individually stylized habits within the frames of diversified, but still highly standardised move towards mass consumption, there are the more recent innovations linked to “ecological” and “quality modernisation” pointing towards innovations that are driven by other goals or aims than efficiency and price. There are, however, conflicting views on the drivers for change; segmentation strategies by the large retailers or challenges represented by local producer-consumer networks and alternative producers.

Warde is addressing the debate on changes in the character of food marketing. He points to the increasing selection of goods on offer in the supermarkets as reflecting a substitution between modes of provisioning from home to market, especially as represented by the growing importance of large supermarket chains (Warde 1997), 191). This variety does not necessarily have consequences for substantive patterns of consumption. Indeed, “increasing varieties” may be as much a phenomenon that is discursively staged by certain producers of knowledge, most notably the marketing profession (and certain theories of consumption) (Lien 1997), rather than giving a good description of consumption practices. A comparative study of eating patterns in the Nordic countries suggested surprising homogeneity at the level of meals and types of food items including in the everyday diet (Kjærnes 2001).

Many of the studies of change in food production and consumption seem share implicit assumptions of relatively uni-directional influences when it comes to change; changes in food provisioning systems affect food consumption while influences in the other direction are less considered.

Years ago, Hans Rask Jensen presented three models of the relation between production and consumption (Jensen 1984). One was of course the assumption within neoclassical economics of the sovereign consumer, the second being the critique coming from political economy and critical theory, which focussed on the dominance of the sphere of production, consumers (or the sphere of reproduction) being passive recipients facing estrangement, fetishization of commodities, etc. Rask Jensen pointed to a third position that assumes a balance between production and consumption, giving the state a distinct role. This was typically a position of Scandinavian social democracy, where the balance was to be ensured by state intervention and consumer protection. Even though the relationships between state, market and consumers have been important in consumer policies – not the least within the area of food, it has rarely been explicated in analyses of consumption.

The neo-classical economic approach may seem as successful as ever and there is active criticism, pointing to role of corporate power. Yet, Jensen’s typology may seem a bit outdated. The consumer role has become more “socialized” in the sense that it allows agency, individually and linked to political mobilisation. The sphere of consumption is no longer necessarily seen as a private sphere merely reflecting conditions of production. Our point is that agency or shifts in power cannot be assumed - nor denied on the basis of principle – it is an empirical matter. The state is neither irrelevant nor (necessarily) merely an instrument for production interests. Instead of assuming interrelations between consumption, production and the state on theoretical grounds, we should study them – not only in terms of powers, interests and responsibilities, but also in terms of, the food as such and what happens to it (Warde 1997, Lien 1997). In order to understand change in consumption, we need to develop a

conceptual toolbox that can catch such interrelations and how they impact on consumption. We are not ready to present such a toolbox, we can only discuss some aspects or dimensions that need to be considered in such an enterprise.

In the case of food alterations in what people do in terms of buying and eating are easily observed, especially at the level of purchase. But careful studies of what people do often reveal surprising stability when it comes to basic elements of eating. It is therefore important to ask if the observed alterations reflect deeper social change in food consumption and, if so, the dynamics and mechanisms involved. To what degree is change mirroring transformations in production systems? Is this a matter of segmentation strategies or local/alternative producer initiatives? What about influences *from* the consumption side on the supply side and public discourse? Is that in the form of producer-consumer networks or pushes from consumers? And what about politics and regulation? We will approach such questions by going into an area that has received a lot of attention over the last decade, namely the emergence of organic food. We compare the consumption of organic food in Denmark and Norway, which display remarkable differences. Something has happened in Denmark, very little in Norway.

#### **4 The consumption of organic food in Denmark and Norway**

Issues of sustainability in relation to food emerge in our everyday lives in many different ways. For food, environmental issues are associated with forms of production and transportation; the use of pesticides and fertilizers, use of water, deforestation, and energy required for meat and vegetable production, omissions of greenhouse gases, and the distance and mode of transport. Contamination, land resources, and energy are at the focus of attention, but they are very often socially bundled together with other issues, such as animal welfare, social rights of workers, the viability of local communities, gustatory quality, etc.

Sustainability - or the lack thereof - affects the physical and social environment as well as the human body. In-depth studies of food consumption demonstrate that from ordinary people's point of view, effects are often combined in complex ideas of 'the healthy' versus 'the unhealthy', 'the natural' versus 'the artificial', 'the good' versus 'the bad' (Holm & Kildevang 1996; Halkier 2001). Consequently, people develop strategies addressing these issues, which ensure that the foods brought into the household are 'clean' or 'pure' (O'Doherty Jensen 2003). Symbolically and practically, this is often combined into 'organic' food products, but with close association to social mobilisation around 'slow food', 'food miles', 'local food', 'fair trade', and 'farmer's markets'. Sustainability needs not be a dichotomous 'either or' matter. We find perceptions of degrees of sustainability. Food items can be "almost organic". Within an everyday setting, the condition for judging what is the 'right' or the 'best' food to look for particular labels, particular food suppliers, or particular types of outlets. These differences are generally not a matter of choice, but determined by the structure of food distribution within the area where you live and shop. 'Organic food' is therefore not a stable and uniform category, but strongly dependent on the situations in which it is produced, presented and used.

Many contributions on food and sustainability have seen consumption activities as unimportant for sustainability or as representing a passive reflection of conditions of

production. Building on economic/liberal ideas, others have seen consumption as determinant for production. Both views share a view of consumption as synonymous with purchase. Nor is there much reflection on the significance of the highly varied settings for purchase. Buying fresh organic food directly on a farm, via a box scheme, or as pre-packaged goods from a dedicated supermarket shelf represent very different kinds of experiences. But in addition to that, there is generally a lack of interest and consideration of how norms and activities related to cooking and eating as part of everyday life impact on food purchases. However, the detailed and often overlooked social norms that regulate eating practices are important for the structure of meals and dishes, and thus for the relative proportions of animal versus vegetable products and the degree of processing. Sustainable consumption is a matter of ordinary culinary practices. But it is also a matter of politics and social mobilization. If consumption practices are part of constructing social relationships, we here have to consider immediate relations as well as those formed within other contexts. Studies of political and ethical consumerism indicate that in many cases there is a link between individualised 'mobilisation' in the market in the form of political or ethical consumption, collective mobilisation and public attention (Micheletti 2003).

But how is consumer mobilisation embedded in everyday practices? And are these practices influenced only by norms and expectations of eating? Or, conversely, are they mainly mirroring conditions of production? As indicated above, we think that instead of choosing, in order to understand changes, we need to focus on the dynamics of the interrelations between these arenas and to see how the political sphere influences both. . To illustrate our points, we have chosen to compare Denmark and Norway. These two Scandinavian countries share many features, historically, politically, and culturally. They are neighbouring countries, welfare states of the social democratic type, with strong emphasis on state intervention. They are also rich countries, with 11- 12 per cent of income spent on food, and relatively homogeneous, culturally and economically. The food sectors are in both cases dominated by powerful farmers (farmer coops and interest organisations), a concentrated processing industry, and supermarket based distribution systems (Kjærnes et al. 2007). The consumption of organic food, however, comes out as very different. Our discussion is in no way a full in-depth analysis, but rather a brief empirical overview exemplifying our point. The discussion builds on empirical material from the 'Trust in Food' project and on secondary data and analyses.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1 illustrates common attitudes and practices regarding food related issues and sustainability in the two countries. It shows that people's concerns and interests regarding food related issues are quite similar in Denmark and Norway. People seem to care strongly about food poisoning and GM food as well as animal welfare, pesticides, and additives. The emphasis on specific concerns is somewhat different, but there is no tendency of more or less concern. Generally, when being asked in this manner, people come out as highly concerned (or politically correct), with relatively little differentiation between issues. This may or may not refer to own food consumption. Concerns are not, however, necessarily associated with own shopping practices. When asking how important the issue of environmental friendliness

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<sup>1</sup> The differences between the organic sectors in the two countries are reflected even in the availability of relevant, systematic information. While there is quite detailed knowledge of the consumption of organic food in Denmark and also good overviews of the distribution system, such knowledge is much more scarce in Norway – except when it comes to the shares of agricultural production that are organic. These differences make a comparison more difficult, but they do, at the same time, give a good illustration of the different degrees of institutionalisation of this area in the two countries.

is for own shopping for a particular food item (tomatoes), the same survey gives lower, but still high, levels of involvement, somewhat higher in Denmark than in Norway. When the question about practice is made even more concretely related to own routines, asking whether the respondent 'often' buys organic products (alternatives 'sometimes' and 'seldom'), this national difference becomes much more accentuated. A considerable proportion of the respondents regularly buy organic food in Denmark, but very few do so in Norway. As will be reflected in the discussion below, the percentage of organic shoppers in Norway is probably even overly optimistic.

*Table 1 Concerns for food issues, environmental friendliness, and shopping for organic food in Denmark and Norway (percent)<sup>2</sup>(N=1000 in each country)*

Important for their society	Denmark	Norway
Food poisoning	84	87
GM food	63	75
Animal welfare	91	89
Pesticides	87	82
Additives (preservatives, colouring)	80	77
Environmental friendliness important when buying tomatoes	50	42
Do you buy organic products - often	30	8

Turning now to the organic food markets in the two countries, we find that they diverge in several respects. In *Denmark*, the Coop supermarkets, which is one of the three dominant chains, already in 1993 launched a large campaign offering reduced prices on organic products. The big supermarket chains (which together have 80- 90 per cent of the retail market) have gradually developed a centralized market of organic foods. 70 per cent of the organic food is sold through supermarkets. At the same time, there are quite successful alternative distribution channels, especially in the form of box schemes. The marketing of organic food has therefore developed into an extensive, but also heterogeneous system. This is reflected even on the consumer side. Only 8-9 per cent of the Danes never buy organic food, while the largest proportion is represented by those who buy organic food sometimes or regularly, but without being characterised as "heavy users" (O'Doherty Jensen & al 2001, (Torjusen et al. 2004). We can say that organic consumption in Denmark has become "normalized", as reflected in considerable differentiation internally among those who do use organic food.

This is contrasted by Norway, where the big supermarkets (which together have even higher market shares) have been little involved in the promotion of organic food. Few, expensive, and relatively low quality organic products have been on offer, not accompanied by any

<sup>2</sup> The source is a representative telephone survey conducted as part of the TRUSTINFOOD project in November 2002 (Pope and Kjærnes 2003), [www.trustinfood.org](http://www.trustinfood.org). The survey was carried out in Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Norway, and Portugal.

significant active marketing. Complaints about poor quality have been quite frequent. Attitudes among consumers are relatively positive, and qualitative studies indicate that availability and price are felt as the major obstacles for buying more organic foods (Torjusen, 2001). Most of the organic produce has been sold via special shops (Helios), which are few and far between (Vittersø, 2001). This is changing a bit now, as for example reflected in Coop Norway and Norgesgruppen (two of the four totally dominant supermarket chains) launching a campaign on organic food. While sales figures are increasing, there are clearly very few heavy users and the majority (around two thirds) of the households never buy organic food. In Norway, thus, the consumption of organic food has not in any way become normalized.

But the differences cannot be attributed to diverging supermarket strategies alone. The structure of production is as much of a bottleneck. 6,5 per cent of the Danish agricultural production is organic. The supply is stable and quite diversified. In Norway, the proportions range from 1,7 per cent for dairy products to 0,6 per cent for meat. Added to that, only parts of the production are actually sold as 'organic' food. The rest (84 per cent for meat and 52 per cent for dairy products) are distributed and marketed as conventional products. Technologies and logistics are made for bulk production and have large difficulties in handling a differentiated food supply (Jacobsen 2001).

We might speculate that Danish public and consumer reactions to intensive farming methods coincided with the problems that the producers encountered in export markets with their traditional price oriented, bulk production strategy. Both the state and the retailers seem to have been relatively sensitive to these changes. The Norwegian situation is instead characterised by a very strong alliance between a public thinking that the small-scale, protected farming is the best guarantee of safe and environmentally sustainable food, and a farming sector that has developed a clientilistic relationship to the state, legitimised not only by issues of food safety but also by issues of rural development, national security etc. In between, there is in Norway a manufacturing industry and a concentrated retailing sector which thrives on the (protected) marketing and distribution of standardised food and competing on price.

No directly comparative information on state support to organic production is available. But active state involvement cannot be attributed to a generally interventionist regime. In both countries, the state is heavily involved in direct support to organic production as well as in the development of assurance and labelling programmes. The impression is that the Danish state was more active at an earlier stage, compared to the Norwegian state. It must be noted here, however, that while Danish regulation represents policy support to an overall very intensive, profitable and export oriented agricultural sector, Norwegian agriculture is protected by high import tariffs and strongly dependent on state subsidies. (This may be the reason why there are so detailed Norwegian figures on production and so little attention towards distribution and marketing.) It is therefore not surprising that when something now happens in the field of organics in Norway, it happens by public intervention. Last year, the Ministry of Agriculture launched a programme aiming at 15 per cent organic production by 2015, subsidies to farmers representing a major measure. Even though retail sales figures are increasing, it is too early

(and there is too poor documentation) to judge about changes – at the levels of production, marketing and consumption.<sup>3</sup>

If we look at the relationship between consumers and the state, there are also differences (Nielsen 2006; Terragni 2006). The Danish state is generally very hesitant to intervene in food consumption practices, with regard to giving concrete dietary advice via educational measures as well as in the form of market regulation. This liberal political approach is very evident for example in nutrition policy (Holm et al. 1993). The Norwegian approach is instead characterised by high legitimacy for regulating food consumption, for example reflected in a long history of a nutrition policy that can be characterised by paternalism as well as market intervention.

But differences go even beyond the context of the food market and its regulation and are also reflected in (and promoted by) public discourse and political mobilisation. For several decades, conditions of Danish food production have been subject to heavy criticism by various organisations and by the mass media, and there has been numerous media scandals about food production, distribution and control systems. Consequently, critical discussions about the Danish food sector have been high on the public and political agenda. In sharp contrast, in Norway the public agenda has been dominated by support to Norwegian food producers who are seen as more environmentally, and socially sustainable and animal friendly than their foreign counterparts. Scepticism has been directed towards the “threats” of imports. While several food related crises have been discussed in the Danish parliament, in Norway domestic food problems have in nearly all cases been handled as practical matters for the bureaucracy, without too much politicisation and little mobilisation. As such, Norwegian public discourse has therefore not represented a drive for alternative forms of provisioning nor for consumer mobilisation, but has probably instead provided legitimacy for already established policies supporting conventional agriculture within the frames of strongly protectionist policies.

Finally, there is a significant difference in the form of activism between the two countries, namely with respect to the connection between political protest and personal lifestyle. In Denmark, there has been a tendency among leftwing intellectuals to associate activism with an alternative, liberal lifestyle – in terms of food, sex, alcohol, clothing, etc. Radical intellectuals in Norway have responded to such questions in a very different way. Rather than being liberal and “alternative”, they have emphasised temperance and a popular (anti-elitist) lifestyle. Moreover, for questions such as criticism of intensive farming, the Norwegian leftist approach has been to demand political solutions and opposing market based ones, thus making search for alternative supplies more or less irrelevant. So, while there was from the beginning, or as part of the beginning, a politicised “consumer push” in small, but important groups in Denmark, organic consumers have had to be “created” more or less from above in Norway.

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<sup>3</sup> This task is obviously still unsettled. The implementation plan has already been reconsidered in terms of funding, organisation and the involved, concerned parties. At the moment, there does not seem to be any kind of voice or representation from the consumer side.

## 5 Discussion

There is an extensive literature on ecological modernisation. We have intently more or less overlooked that debate in an attempt to use the case of organic food to discuss how we can capture change in food consumption as influenced by interrelations between actors, arenas and institutions. We have presented a simple comparison of data from Denmark and Norway, two countries that in most respects are very similar, but which are quite different when it comes to the consumption of organic food. In the introduction we asked why Danes have changed their consumption to include organic produce while Norwegians have not? In more general terms we wanted to identify social forces that bring about change in food related practices which appear in this kind of national differences.

There is a high level of concern about food issues in both countries therefore result in almost opposite results. Our presentation indicates that explanations to these differences are not to be found in individual concerns and motivations, but in socio-political and institutional structures within the respective food sectors. It is quite obvious from the two cases that these structures are not to be seen as a more or less abstract “context” for individual decisions, but as institutions that are directly involved in and influence the organisation of organic food consumption as well as its normative framing. As a general characteristic, organic food, its production, distribution, and consumption, comes out as normalised and highly institutionalised in Denmark, while that is not the case in Norway.

We can see that one important explanation to this important difference is to be found in the diverging provisioning systems. This is probably no surprise to a sociological audience. But the differences are not merely reflections of the difference between an industrialised export oriented and a small-scale protected food sectors. These differences in provisioning systems clearly influence how peoples’ concerns about food sustainability best be expressed politically and practically. It follows that changes in food practices must be seen as closely related to the structure and history of food provisioning systems. But it also follows from our case, that changing practices are not merely passive reflections of what goes on in these systems. Rather, they are influenced by and part of a political mobilisation, which has promoted public policies and regulations, which again influence food production, distribution and consumption.

There is a surprising “match” between the conditions and strategies of the arenas that we have focussed on. In the case of Denmark, people’s expectations of an alternative, organic supply are paralleled by retailers’ attempts to differentiate and diversify. A critical and persistent public opinion has pushed for market innovation, well-matched with interest in an alternative lifestyle. And farmers – and agricultural policies – have seen organic production as an escape from the pressure on efficiency and price of conventional mass production.

In Norway, organic food has not gained the same status as “a good cause”. Farmers, processors and retailers meet in an interest in the benefits of streamlined bulk production, all well protected by high tariff barriers. These barriers are legitimised by protection against problems associated with more intensive agricultural production abroad. This political solution matches well with widespread beliefs held in the Norwegian population about how environmental problems in food production should be solved, by regulation and protection.

Our very simple cases, simplistically presented, illustrate our point about the multiplicity of interrelations and influences in which food consumption activities are involved. There may be general tendencies of change, as concretised here in the observation that organic food is after all relevant in both our country cases. But this is almost the only aspect that these two countries share in this concrete case. As such, it is a warning about employing fixed assumptions about the character of consumption or consumers and also about assumptions that discursive representations reflect what people do or the institutional frames of consumption activities. This is not a quest for dull empiricism or for total relativism. But we need to develop middle-range theories and conceptualisations of food consumption which can help us to capture and problematise how changes in markets and politics affect and interact with changes on the consumption side.

To understand how changes take place in food consumption, we *firstly* cannot focus on individual value hierarchies and preferences. Sustainable food consumption is interpreted and handled within the context of everyday life, usually not as explicit reflections, but as part of the 'muddling through' that characterise mundane practices such as everyday eating (Holm and Kildevang 1996; Halkier 2001). Organic consumption represents situated events, influenced by strong, socially developed norms and conventions. *Secondly*, influences on purchasing and eating cannot be sought only internally within practices. Influences on eating practices must be found in the interaction between practices and their wider institutional and societal context.

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