

6 The complement of political consumerism:

Political producerism in the German organic food sector

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There is a lot to know about the food we eat. The ingredients for a jar of spaghetti sauce, a box of cereal, or a cup of coffee could come from around the corner or around the world; they could be grown with numerous pesticides or just a few; they could be grown on huge corporate organic farms or on small family-run conventional farms, they could be harvested by children or by machines; they could be stored in hygienic or pest-infested storage facilities; or they could increase or decrease the risk of cancer. A description of any food product could include information on a myriad of attributes (Golan, Kuchler & Mitchell, 2009, p. 1).

Food production nowadays is organised in a huge global system that is no longer a coordinated local network of producers and consumers but a network that links together spatially distant sites. The globalised food sector bears advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, Western consumers can choose from a wide range of products being supplied almost everywhere all year around, independently of season or origin of growth. On the other hand, mass production of foodstuffs globally violates worker's rights or animal welfare, and damages the environment. This arises partially from consumers' demand for low prices. Also, many producers seem to care more about quantity than quality, a credo that led to severe food scandals in the past, with Dioxin found in eggs and chicken meat being one of the most recent ones. Since often producers consciously put consumers' health at risk, a growing number of consumers already have withdrawn their trust from established production schemes and now pay more attention to what to purchase in the market.

Many scholars have written about the newly emerging emancipation of the consumer. Michele Micheletti (2003) coined the term "political consumerism", referring to those consumers that care about the ethical, social and political background of a product. These consumers came to realise that their consumption patterns do have an impact beyond their purchase, and that choosing one product over another can make a difference. In Micheletti's words, political consumers

make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices. Their choices are based on attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or non-economic issues that concern personal and family well being and ethical or political assessment of favourable and unfavourable business and government practice (p. 2).

Because consumers mainly make their on-the-spot-decisions in the food market by looking at the information given on a certain product, labels play an essential role for political consumerism. Yet, an unquantifiable number of labels exist, and only sometimes labels reliably and sufficiently inform the consumer. Most of the time, they selectively display attributes and therewith serve as mere marketing instruments, turning the product at hand into something “natural”, “fresh” or “healthy”, at the same time lacking justification to do so. In fact, most labels do not reveal the hidden and real price of a product, and hence constantly mislead the consumers. The real price of a product must include its negative externalities such as damage of the environment, long transportation ways, or exploitation of workers. The author Matthew Rousu (2008) argues that there is a welfare loss from inadequate information and that with “ideal labels” (p. 1) consumers would stop to “mis-purchase” (p. 10). Therefore, with transparent and understandable information given on labels, consumers could buy products they really intend to buy. Yet, considering the limited space on a product, there always has to be a reduction of complexity in order to make labels useful.

To solve this paradox of labelling – the realities of limited space on products and the need for information – “political producerism” is needed, a concept we introduce in this chapter. Political producerism is the complement or even precondition for political consumerism. In order to balance out the reduction of complexity of information on products, producers and retailers must be willing to find other channels to give insight in the politics behind their products. For providing honest information, producers and retailers come together in networks to cooperate in promoting their ideas. We claim that it is indeed these networks that give sense to labels, bestowing them with credibility. Within such a network, the label therefore functions as a bridge of trust between the producers and retailers on the one side, and consumers on the other. The label as such bears no detailed information but refers to name of the network, making it clear to the consumer where the product at hand comes from and how it has been produced.

In this chapter we will show that there is a direct link between political producerism and political consumerism, meaning that labels and especially the networks behind them enable consumers to make informed choices and to voice their political opinion. So far,

academics often assessed labels from an economic point of view, for example adopting a game theoretic approach or dealing with the problem of asymmetric information in the food market (Golan, Kuchler, Mitchell, 2009; McCluskey, 2000; Guthman, 2006). Other academics such as Hébert (2010) argue that food labels are mainly established to cater to the economy of qualities, referring to the creation of luxury niche-market goods. In contrast to these accounts and to other accounts of authors such as Vogl, Kilcher & Schmidt (2005) and McMahon (2005), we believe that producers and retailers indeed are important agents in politics of food labelling. Rather than merely following the demands of the market, we will show that producers and retailers who engage in political producerism mainly act according to their own beliefs and standards.

After theoretically establishing the concept of political producerism we present our case study of political producerism at work. We will investigate how the networks behind German organic food labels bestow their labels with credibility. Our case study in particular focuses on the three labels *Demeter*, *Bioland* and *Bio-Siegel* and is based on qualitative interviews with different stakeholders as well as on a discourse analysis of information material provided by the networks. We employ this material in a twofold way: as a source in order to get more information about the specific networks and as a topic in order to show how different actors discursively establish credibility and distinguish themselves from one another.

Analytical Background

I wake up to the excesses of the night before. Washing up in piles. Open my bottle of Ecover and squeeze biodegradable liquid on to yesterday's plates crusted with residues of GM-free organic pizza. Fill a cafetière with Fairtrade coffee and boil a free-range egg. Take a 'not tested on animals' Lush bubble bath. Pull on my 'child labour free' Reeboks, 'made by 100% union labour' Levis, and 'never use furs' Chloe T-shirt. Spray my hair with a Wella non-CFC canister. Read the papers and learn about the latest McDonald's boycott. Remind myself to pick up a leaflet from the protesters on my next outing by jotting down a note on my pad of recycled paper (Hertz, 2003, p. 119).

The scenario Noreena Hertz describes in the above quote perfectly illustrates what Michele Micheletti (2003) calls political consumerism. The term stands for consumers that are knowingly targeting producers to express their views on justice, fairness, and issues related to self-interest, such as personal health. One way of doing this is to *boycott*

a certain brand, meaning to refrain from buying a certain brand's products. The other way to consume politically by choosing one product over another – by engaging in what Micheletti calls “*buycott*”. In both ways political consumers make statements about favourable or unfavourable government and business practices, hoping that their actions to have political consequences (pp. 2, 14-16).

Micheletti (2003) believes that there are two kinds of political consumers. The first type is motivated by political, social or ethical considerations, and the second type is motivated by self-interest. The first type indulges in self-restraint or self-sacrifice by boycotting a certain product due to its unbearable background. Political consumerism for them is a way of expressing their political views and to show solidarity with others. For the second type, political consumerism is a means to solve private problems. These self-interested consumers are worried about their health and well-being, and therefore want to consume fresh, healthy, tasty and natural food (pp. 19-20).

Political consumerism needs a considerable amount of motivation, money and time and not everybody is willing and able to engage in it. We claim that even if these three preconditions are met, political consumerism additionally requires retailer and producer networks to engage in political producerism. Such networks employ different credibility tools, bridging the information gap between consumers and products. One tool is to use “guiding narratives” to help consumers relate to a label and possibly identify with it. This means that they create a story line surrounding the label, which justifies and stands for certain production processes. The second tool is what we call “communication style”. This implies that different networks use different communication channels, communicating their message in different manners. The third tool is “quality control”, which incorporates the different mechanisms that the different networks employ to prove their quality claims. In this context it must be clarified that political producerism includes the willingness to allow for independent third party control. We claim that these credibility tools and therewith the work of retailer and producer networks help to diminish or even overcome the problems persisting with labels that are not backed up by a network – or put differently, with labels where retailers and producers do not engage in political producerism.

We believe that it is political producerism that allows for what Micheletti (2003) termed “*buycott*”. Whereas consumer organisations such as “foodwatch” or “utopia” regularly warn consumers about food scandals and help them to *boycott* certain brands and to make a conscious choice *against* a product, it is the retailers and producers behind a label who provide consumers with the necessary information to make a conscious choice *for* a product. While the concept applies to various branches of the market, in our case study we focus exclusively on the food sector. We opted for the food sector as we detected multiple problems with labelling within the sector.

The biggest problem is the proliferation of labels. Some consumers experience these various consumption opportunities rather as a burden. Moreover, they are confused by the information given on the product itself. After all, what does it mean when a product claims to be “fresh” or “healthy”? As Pauline Ippolito (2003) discovered, health claims on labels increased significantly during the last years, becoming an ever more important component of advertisement and consumer bonding (p. 735). This kind of advertisement then becomes prevention for profit, with firms promoting their products for promoting health, and in the end only promoting their sale numbers (Freimuth, Hammond, Stein, 2003). Because often “business is telling the politicians what they can and cannot do” (Micheletti, 2003, p. 114) and governments fear over-regulation of the market and hinder free trade and economic welfare, regulation on the provision of information about production processes and the issuing of proper labels has still not been accomplished until hitherto. We will point out that this task has to be taken over by producers and retailers enabling the consumer to *buycott*. Yet political producerism still relies on governmental action in the sense that the state mandates third parties to counter-check the work done by the networks.

Case study: Organic food labelling schemes in Germany

In order to make our conceptual assumptions more tangible, we conducted a case study on the German organic food sector, which will illustrate political producerism at work. We chose Germany because of the coexistence of state-regulation via quality controls and an own state label on the one hand and a long tradition of organic farming associations and their own labelling schemes on the other hand. The oldest one, *Demeter*, has been established since 1924 and developed a labelling scheme in 1928 (Demeter, 2011a). Today, 68% of the agricultural area which is farmed according to organic standards in Germany is cultivated by farmers who are member of one of the nine organic farming associations, the largest of them being *Bioland* (5.443 members in January 2011), followed by *Naturland* (2.441 members), and *Demeter* (1.387 members). In total, around 6% of the agricultural area in Germany is currently being cultivated according to an organic method (Bund Ökologischer Lebensmittelwirtschaft (BÖLW), 2011). Although this is almost three times as much as in 1996 (Bundesministerium für Ernährung, Landwirtschaft und Verbraucherschutz (BMELV, 2011), the organic sector is still relatively small compared with the conventional food industry. Considering the relatively small size of the market it is

surprising that it is highly segmented, as different organic food labels stand for different standards and quality claims. There are also significant price differences between the differently labelled organic products and studies have shown that consumers are willing to pay these higher prices for products bearing a specific label (BÖLW, 2011, pp. 27-28). This holds true for both labels of organic farming associations and the state-owned Bio-Siegel, which was established in 2001. Even though the latter has been formally launched later on to the market than the labels of the farming associations, it should be clarified at this point that ever since 2001 all organic products in Germany must bear the Bio-Siegel. Likewise, all organic products are required to undergo the same basic controls in accordance with EU organic farming Regulation. It is only when organic products apply to higher criteria than those of the Bio-Siegel that an additional association-label can coexist with the Bio-Siegel, whereby the product undergoes a more sophisticated quality-check.

As such, it follows that the various actors in the German organic food market have been successful in establishing their own niche market. Moreover, due to price differences it can be claimed that consumers of organic produce make conscious choices for a specific form of organic food. The question arises how the different organic producers and retailers managed to bestow onto their labels a certain level of credibility that persuades consumers to purchase, and even pay a higher price for it. In order to answer this question, we chose to focus on the national Bio-Siegel as well as the Demeter and Bioland labels, with Demeter being the oldest and Bioland being the largest organic farming association.

We structure our analysis in accordance to the credibility tools introduced above. In order to account for guiding narrative, we will outline the political or philosophic mission of the different associations. For the credibility tool of communication strategy, we will demonstrate how the guiding narrative is communicated to the consumer and who is engaged in defining the criteria for the respective label. We will specifically focus on how the consumers are engaged in the labelling scheme. Finally, to account for quality control, we investigate how the different labelling schemes engage in controls in order to prove to control agencies the quality claims they are making to consumers.

We will demonstrate that although all three labels promote the focal value of organic food, the labels significantly vary in guiding narrative, communication strategy, and quality control. Therefore, it can be said that although all organisations unite behind the goal of promoting organic agriculture, each organisation constitutes one distinct political producer and retailer network. We will show that the different producer and retailer networks engage in political producerism by combining the different credibility tools in different ways. An important distinction in this respect is how the different networks define the role of the consumer.

Drawing on Dubuisson-Quellier and Lamine (2008), we will distinguish between “empowerment” and “delegation” in consumer responsibility within the networks. Empowerment refers to “contractual mechanisms between consumers and producers and on the construction of collective choice”, whereas delegation refers to “market mechanisms, such as trademarks and labels, which allow consumers to make their choice in the market” (p. 56). Thus, networks standing in for consumer empowerment place great importance on direct interaction between retailers, producers and consumers. Networks focussing on delegation place more importance on communication via the label. Since direct interaction is rather low here, third parties serve as a mediator of trust, as they check the claims borne by the respective label.

Demeter

Rudolf Steiner was a clairvoyant person. He is one of the few people whom you can call an adept. In earlier cultures there were always adepts. In earlier times, those were the priests in the temples. Those were all adept people who could not only see the material world but could also see the spiritual that is behind it. The main idea of Steiner was actually just that everything material we can find here on earth is actually nothing else but condensed spiritual. Once there was somewhere the spiritual, the thought, which condensed further and further until it became matter. This transaction is of course hard to understand if you are stuck in the material world. Basically, Steiner could, due to his special understanding, see through the causal relations of nature. He could understand the things, which we can only see, on a higher level. He could, as it were, see the spiritual backgrounds of the world. Today that is extremely unfamiliar thinking. That’s absolutely clear.

This quote is taken from an interview we conducted with a Demeter farmer. We want to mention at this point that all material we use in this chapter is originally in German, and we translated it into English. The interviewee above illustratively pointed out that the personal charisma of Rudolf Steiner, on whose principles Demeter has been founded, is an important source of credibility. Steiner nowadays is viewed as a spiritual person who always looked beyond the functioning of the material world. In line with the founding father’s viewpoints, the guiding narrative central to Demeter’s self-understanding is *Ganzheitlichkeit*. This term stands for a holistic philosophy that spans from the biodynamic production of goods over their sale in specialised shops to the way Demeter customers live, including a vision the improvement of the world. As the following section demonstrates, this guiding narrative is discursively constructed and socially enacted at the same time.

Thus, *Ganzheitlichkeit* is not only a quality which is being sold in form of food products, but also the structuring principle and a source of identity of the Demeter producer and retailer network, and therewith of Demeter's political producerism. Correspondingly, the anthroposophic philosophy developed by Rudolf Steiner constitutes the spiritual centre, whereas Demeter farms, and to a lesser extent also shops, constitute the local centres of biodynamic agriculture.

Demeter puts great effort in the discursive representation of its philosophy: In a press statement (Demeter, 2010) on the quality differences between Demeter and other organic food, the association claims that farmers cultivating according to the biodynamic method will themselves develop insights into the spiritual background of the material world: “[t]hey do not only sense the concrete material substances, the physical forces of nature, but also the formative forces of the cosmos”. Thus, the association managed to discursively connect Steiner's abstract philosophy to the concrete practice of Demeter farmers. As the Demeter farmer is presented as mediator between the spiritual and the material world, he can enact the discursively constructed guiding narrative of *Ganzheitlichkeit*. He therefore becomes an important bearer of credibility and an important figure of the network to which the consumer can relate personally. This interweaving of discourse and action is also an essential structural part of the biodynamic farming method. Special biodynamic substances form a middle position between anthroposophic inspirations and concrete standards for animal welfare or the strict prohibition of artificial fertiliser. It is claimed that biodynamic substances that farmers use as a sort of “homoeopathic fertiliser” make the soil “more vivid and fertile” (Demeter, 2010). According to this understanding, Demeter farmers do not only cultivate the material ground but also contribute to its spiritual enhancement. Thus, as the discourse goes, “Demeter farmers give back to nature more than they take from it” (ibid.). Also the Demeter farmers we interviewed stressed that the biodynamic substances could improve the energetic quality of food and soil.

The Demeter customer is also incorporated in to the holistic philosophy. The typical Demeter customer is conceptualised as well informed, environmentally responsible, socially concerned, and quality-conscious. The association suggests that by buying Demeter products, the consumer can prove that he meets the characteristics just mentioned. Although the Demeter farmers we interviewed stated that only a minority of their customers are anthroposophics, they emphasised that the majority of their consumers were very well informed and convinced of their holistic approach towards farming. Still, both the Demeter farmers and the owner of a Demeter store engaged in a categorisation of consumers, therewith suggesting that for different customers different aspects of the Demeter quality – such as animal welfare or consuming luxury products

– were most important in their purchasing decisions. However, all of them stressed that they did not want to judge the different motivation for buying Demeter products.

It can be therefore be said that through communicating the guiding narrative of *Ganzheitlichkeit* Demeter bridges the gap between the association and farmers who truly stand behind anthroposophy on the one hand, and consumers who may only be interested in an alternative model of agriculture, a more natural life style or simply high quality food on the other hand. Despite its strong ideological commitment, the association clearly opens up to a larger variety of consumers. If a consumer chooses a product bearing a Demeter label, he buys a product backed up by a strong producer and retailer network but nevertheless is still free to base his decision on the criteria most important to him.

In regard to the second credibility tool we found out that Demeter’s communication strategy can be perceived as “controlled empowerment”. It is not appropriate to speak of unconditional empowerment because consumers’ engagement in discussions on quality criteria and farming practices is rather limited. To a certain extent this also holds true for farmers. Our interviews revealed that although farmers are encouraged to exchange their personal practices and new techniques and also engage in peer control, the core criteria of the association are still set in accordance to the founding father Steiner, and are safeguarded by the Demeter association. However, the communication strategy of Demeter goes much further than mere delegation.

Although the Demeter label on its own constitutes a mechanism of delegation, it should be viewed in a broader context. As our interviews revealed, organic consumers do look for the label in order to make their on-the-spot-decisions while shopping. Yet they do so mainly after having gathered information about Demeter at an earlier point via the different communication channels of the association. The label does not work on its own but could be seen as a condensed summary of a large information stream from the association to the consumer, as becomes clear with the following.

Firstly, the Demeter network provides for the possibility of direct interaction between consumers and producers on the farms. A search engine containing a list of producers who directly sell their products from the farm can be found online. This list provides all the relevant contact data of the farmer including address, e-mail address and telephone number, therewith enabling the consumer to choose his favourite type of communication. Demeter communicates that it lies at the heart of it to be open to inquiry, meaning that farms are open for visitors and ideally constitute a site of learning. This aspect was also constantly brought up in our interviews. One farmer told us that people who would like to visit his farm are approaching him regularly and he answers these demands as often as possible. Another farmer emphasised that “especially in a small farm shop customer advice

is extremely important. We can tell something about every single product we sell, because these are products that we use and eat". It becomes evident that Demeter undertakes great efforts to make the acquisition of information as easy as possible for the consumer.

Secondly, the Demeter retailers actively promote Demeter's self-understanding: they seek to bridge the gap between the locality where the food is produced and the locality where the food is sold. At the point of retail there is again a combination of structural elements of the Demeter network and its discursive strategy. Structurally, Demeter products can only be sold in organic food stores – there even is a special programme called "Demeter active partners" within which stores establish a close relationship to the association through seminars and retail practices. Discursively, the Demeter association stresses that Demeter's products are only sold in places that represent Demeter quality and can provide skilled advice to customers (Demeter, 2010). This especially contributes to the establishment of a specific identity of Demeter retailers. In an interview with the owner of such a Demeter active partner organic supermarket, we found that the commitment of retailers to the Demeter community can be very high. The interviewee emphasised his special position as independent retailer and pointed at the high quality of Demeter active partners compared to franchise organic supermarkets and food discounters. He said that "you have to differentiate, because mostly entrepreneur-lead stores have a much stronger commitment and can communicate their philosophy much better to the customer" and "we do not only have sellers and cashiers, we have qualified personnel. That's a huge difference to organic discounters". The active partners serve as a Demeter representative in the urban context, thus enabling a personal relationship of trust for consumers living further away from farms.

Thirdly, the *Demeter Journal*, a quarterly magazine for customers, as well as the Demeter website, play a crucial role in communicating with the consumer. They promote the Demeter self-understanding and create a Demeter consumer identity. The Demeter website (Demeter, 2011b) features a number of farm portraits and the Demeter Journal regularly contains the section called *Vor Ort*, on site, which tells the story of a specific Demeter personality or farm community. These articles and photographs obviously want to show that Demeter farms are not merely an agricultural production site but a life-space that is shaped by the families living and working on the farm. The main themes are community, inter-generationality, tradition and social responsibility. For instance, the spring 2011 issue of the Demeter Journal features the life of Lily Ackerman who has been involved with biodynamic farming since the 1930s. She states that "farm, agriculture and nature all cry for people who create an atmosphere, who live and preserve culture, who open up to the world of the elements and make developments possible. If you are alone,

it is only toil. In a community you can create something” (Demeter Journal 01/2011, p. 11). Such descriptions trigger consumers’ childhood ideas of ideal farm life and thus give them an incentive to identify with the association.

In regard to the Demeter customer identity, the website promotes structural initiatives, for instance consumer associations and local Demeter cooking meetings. Discursively, the Demeter Journal seeks to create a Demeter customer identity and community feeling. For example, in the spring 2011 issue (p. 6) the “fastidious customers” are asked to seek direct contact with producers as well as engage in an online discussion about the qualities of Demeter on the Demeter facebook page. Just next to this appeal there is an advertisement for a product line with the slogan “fair and social starts next door” appealing to the consumers’ social conscience. Additionally, the global responsibility that Demeter consumers are supposed to take by purchasing their products is communicated. In Demeter Journal 01/2009, for example, there is a description about a Demeter project in Egypt that is believed to have made the desert fertile again (pp. 8-13). The customer is taken to a literary journey to a Demeter oasis outside of “boring monocultures” and “smelly chicken-farm-like high rise buildings”, where “family Abouleish is conquering desert land since 1977” with the support of the “Sekrem Friends Germany”. Furthermore, having established a whole network of farms and villages, which are “well cared for with electricity, drinking water, mail, road-network – thanks to the economic strength of the Sekrem group”. This kind of rhetoric invites consumers to relate to the initiative. He is asked to feel that by purchasing Demeter he directly contributes to the success of such initiatives and thus contributes to making the world more just and sustainable in line with the guiding narrative of *Ganzheitlichkeit*. These actions of Demeter demonstrate that they do not only inform but also try to educate the consumer, which constitutes the controlled empowerment communication strategy of the Demeter network.

The Demeter association claims to provide the highest quality of organic food and therefore places great importance on proving this quality by controls and transparency. As explained in the beginning of the case study, there is a basic official state-initiated annual control, which checks the technical details that *all* organic farms in the European Union must comply with. The controlling authority also investigates additional criteria established by the Demeter association. For example, whether the biodynamic substances are stored in an appropriate way. Thus, Demeter puts its additional quality claims up to be tested by the state. Furthermore, there is an additional peer-control mechanism. During the so-called farm conversation, the Demeter farmer has to invite two colleagues in order to discuss the general situation of the farm. In contrast to the control conducted by the agency, these farm conversations do not so much aim at technical details but at

assessing the overall atmosphere of the farm. One of our interviewees described such peer-control the following way: “It’s not so much about production-related issues. We all agree on those . . . But you know what really determines what is going on at the farm are the people who work there and how they are doing. That is the kind of conversations that are taking place then.” In the interview, he emphasised that mutual trust is very important for peer-reviews, as it is hard to scientifically control whether biodynamic substances have been used or not. Often the farmers assessing each other also cooperate in the production of biodynamic substances and regularly meet in regional groups. Thus, both trust and control are increased. Additionally, our interviewees pointed out that often the wholesaler conducts additional spot tests, thereby even further expanding the net of trust.

Also the structure of Demeter farms contributes to quality assurance. Demeter promotes the farm community as an alternative model to agricultural mass-production. This means that Demeter farms should be family-led enterprises that do not specialise in one product, but cultivate plants and farm animals at the same time. Furthermore, Demeter farming needs more space than conventional farming due, for example, to animals being kept in significantly bigger rearing stables than conventional animals. These preconditions make sure that Demeter food cannot be produced in an industrial manner. This greatly differs from the Bio-Siegel discussed later in the chapter, where conventional and organic produce can coexist on a farm and where therefore the danger of an accidental fusion of conventional and organic farming exists.

Finally, Demeter puts great emphasis on transparency, which is important for the credibility tool of communication strategy as well as the credibility tool of quality control. As consumers are actively encouraged to visit farms they can see themselves if they are convinced by the quality promises. Furthermore, our interviewees stressed that in case of abnormalities in certain products, these are immediately taken from the market and consumers are informed about that. Thus, Demeter even manages to use food-scandals among its own producers as a proof of the functioning of the control system. As one interviewee told us, his customers do not perceive scandals in the organic sector as breach of trust as they are relatively few in number, and always detected due to strict controls. In contrast, they think that within the conventional food sector scandals are the rule rather than the exception; however they are not detected reliably due to a general lack of control.

Bioland

Bioland stands for down-to-earth ecological responsibility in agriculture and politics. This guiding narrative is central to both discourse and structure of the organisation. In contrast to Demeter, Bioland does not operate on the basis of a spiritual philosophy. Rather, the

motivation behind the association is the practical goal of giving organic agriculture a central role in society.

One of the Bioland farmers we interviewed told us that Bioland had been founded as a counter-movement against an increasing specialisation in agriculture as well as an intensified industrialisation of Germany starting after World War II. As she put it, family-run farms did not want to be pushed aside by industrialisation but wanted to show that they were “doing things right” and worked for giving agriculture a more prominent place in society again. Her motivation to join Bioland was “that it is a very honest, very straightforward agricultural commitment”. Although she did not deny that the biodynamic practices of Demeter could work out, she is sceptical about putting Steiner and his philosophy at the centre of agricultural practices. She made clear that “I do not have this background and I could also not adopt that anymore and that’s why we opted for joining Bioland”. She believes that taking responsibility for the earth and the people who live on it and lead a sustainable, orderly life-style is a central human value that does not need reference to Steiner. Another farmer expressed it like this: “I always thought I want to stay normal, and I think I still am. I’m not radical or something. I never wanted to be that ... and Demeter, I did not want that, with that philosophy story, moon phases and stuff. That was too ... This is just not my world. Bioland is just closer, more real. A middle way.”

As the central goal of Bioland is to give organic farming a more central place in society, strong political involvement of the higher levels of the organisation is a central part of the self-understanding as well. The Bioland board regularly publishes statements and opinions on ongoing political discussions on topics related to sustainability and organic farming in general. Besides, they use a practical hands-on approach. At the moment, they run a petition against the introduction of genetically modified food in the EU (Bioland, 2011a). They also engage in lobbying on the national as well as European level (Bioland, 2011b). Currently, they try to influence the reform process of European agricultural politics. In the past they have been very successful on the national level: when the national Bio-Siegel was introduced there have been attempts to prohibit additional organic food labelling schemes of the organic farming associations. However, as all our interviewees pointed out, Bioland was successful in preventing this measure. Nevertheless, the Bioland association officially welcomed the introduction of the Bio-Siegel because it fosters their goal of further spreading organic agriculture in society (Bioland, 2001). It became evident that the Bioland consumer is invited to feel that he supports a political project by buying products carrying the label.

Bioland's communication strategy enables consumer empowerment more than Demeter. Whereas Demeter aims at educating its consumers, Bioland tries to mobilise them for political action. On the homepage of the Bioland website we immediately faced an overview of agro-political issues that it currently engages in, as well as a number of links connecting the visitor to standards, quality, or general information. The website transmits the impression that the association does not want to waste any time and space on persuading the consumers of a philosophy but rather wants to keep the website's visitor focused on relevant information, telling him in a way: these are our quality standards – this is what we stand for. The "About us" section in particular speaks this language of clear standards and a down-to-earth, practical hands-on-approach. It does not sound like an idealistic vision but rather like a list which can be ticked off:

Bioland is the leading organic farming association in Germany. Our way of farming is based on closed circuits – no synthetic pesticides, no chemical-synthetic nitrogen fertiliser. Animals are reared in species-appropriate conditions, comestibles are gently processed. This enables an environmentally friendly and sustainable food production. (Bioland, 2011c)

On the website, there are also detailed descriptions about the quality standards Bioland farmers must comply with as well as special articles about different types of animals and plants. These articles are all structured the same way: firstly, they provide general and rather technical information about an animal and its organic rearing. Secondly, a table with three columns accounts for the organic method of rearing, the conventional method of rearing and an explanation why the organic farmer chose organic methods. The table is thirdly followed by some extra details about the history of the species, a link to recipes and a statement that the addresses of farms rearing these animals can be obtained from the Bioland press bureau. Several photos illustrate the living-conditions of animals in organic farming. These illustrations ask for the consumers' positive feelings towards the approach of the association. This transparent and clearly structured type of information provision underlines the hands-on-approach of Bioland.

Whereas the Demeter public relations channels via the Demeter Journal or the Demeter active partner shops are numerous; Bioland's communication is concentrated on direct, local interaction. There is no special consumer magazine for the broader public, only one for farmers and students of agriculture. The clear focus lies on direct contact and down-to-earth advice. One of the farmers told us about an incident when she convinced her neighbours about the advantages of an organic diet:

I have a neighbour, just down there, next to the fields. Her husband has problems with the muscle between his gullet and his stomach. He always has to vomit, her husband. I often told her, you have to change, you must not give him so much glutamate-stuff and so on. One year, two years, I told her again and again, you have to change, you have to do that. And she did. And we became friends. She waters my fields together with her husband. I don't have to do anything. That's great. And in exchange she of course takes all she needs from my field. This is how she slowly changed. Today she buys a lot of organic products. But it was a long way. She had to taste it herself.

The farmer reported to us that for her, political activism takes place on the personal level, as can be seen from the quote above. On a daily basis, she spreads the word and takes every occasion to convince people of the advantages of organic food. Indeed, it is this personal involvement that she perceives as the basis for change. "This is how my shop works, personal contacts, relations . . . For example, I have a customer who always tells me when he cannot come around for his shopping. That's how it works. Personal contacts. I think that's great!" This real life experience is also backed up by the Bioland website, which promotes direct contact as central element of the Bioland idea, referring to the fact that "approximately every second Bioland farmer sells part of his products directly from the farm; in contrast to only every 10th conventional farmer. In this way, Bioland promotes more regional proximity" (Bioland, 2011d). As is made clear by the above, direct personal relationships with the producer and retailer network are an effective way for proving quality and establishing trust.

What is more, consumers can become members of the Bioland association. Although they do not have the right to vote they have the right to bring up proposals (Bioland, 2008). In contrast to Demeter, Bioland therefore follows a participatory approach that wants to empower the consumer to act politically. Bioland places great importance on its basic-democratic structure. Farmers who are members of the association meet in regional groups to exchange their ideas and practices. They can also become politically active via the regional delegate conference or be a candidate for the national delegate conference, the highest decision-making body of the association (Bioland, 2011e). It is legitimate therefore to say that farmers have a significant influence on Bioland practices, criteria and politics which enhances the political producerism of the network, as more power is given to individual actors.

When considering the credibility tool of quality control, Bioland, just as Demeter, makes great effort to promote its products as high-quality organic food. They prove their claims by having their standards tested by state-initiated controls. During the same annual control,

the EU standards are being tested as well. A certain level of structural control stems from the strict Bioland standards. Like Demeter and unlike the Bio-Siegel, Bioland only allows for organic produce on the site, and does not approve of the coexistence of organic and conventional farming. However, in contrast to Demeter, it is easier to run a larger farm, operating according to Bioland standards. Peer control is less formalised but it also exists. On the one hand regular regional meetings contribute to trust-building and mutual transparency amongst farmers. On the other hand, farmers often take their commitment to Bioland standards very seriously and therefore report incidents of misbehaviour they observe on behalf of their colleagues. One of our interviewees described the following incident: “I had a colleague here and I saw how she sprayed chemical herbicides and I was really angry about that. You can’t do that, it’s prohibited. And then I reported her, because I was so angry, because I think that is just not right.”

Finally, due to the fact that direct communication is central to the Bioland association, the farmers are exposed to regular visits and questions of their customers. Next to that, there are numerous sub-regional producer co-operations that jointly sell their products or deliver them directly to the customer. Certainly, those farmers also engage in peer-control, as they have to stand in for the quality produced by their colleagues. This again illustrates how retailers and producers interact by coming together in a network.

Bio-Siegel

In contrast to the Demeter and Bioland labels, the German Bio-Siegel is not a private but a state-owned label. It was in the broader framework of the *Agrarwende*, – a term describing an overall change in German agriculture after the year 2000, with the forgoing occurrence of many BSE-scandals – that the minister for agriculture, nutrition and consumer protection (BMELV), Renate Künast, introduced the Bio-Siegel. Since her focus in policy making was particularly on consumer protection, she initiated the establishment of an organic food label in order to provide guidance to consumers. To help the consumer to make thoughtful decisions, therefore was the main motivation behind the introduction of the Bio-Siegel. The label’s guiding narrative hence is of a more political and practical nature, especially when compared to a rather spiritual-based label such as Demeter. According to the deputy spokesperson of the BMELV, the Bio-Siegel was designed to cater to consumers that do care for their diet and prefer to consume healthy and tasty food in the first place, but are less interested in organic ideology and agro-political action. Thus the Bio-Siegel differs here from Demeter and Bioland, respectively.

The Bio-Siegel is a voluntary labelling scheme that firms have to register, but not to pay for. Thus, the Bio-Siegel is less exclusive than the two labels analysed above. It is

the main aim of the Bio-Siegel to include as many companies, products and customers as possible in the organic idea. Clearly, it is the guiding narrative of inclusiveness that lies at the core of the Bio-Siegel. Therefore, farmers who want to use the Bio-Siegel do not have to agree to a certain ideology, but only have to comply with European organic standards. The Bio-Siegel products must be completely free of GMOs and colouring, and largely free of pesticides and fertilizers, to name a few. In April this year, 3.872 corporations used the Bio-Siegel on more than 62.200 products (Bio-Siegel, 2011). The latter numbers impressively illustrate how the overall network of retailers and producers uniting behind the idea of organic farming has grown over the years.

Since the Bio-Siegel is the base for all organic foodstuffs in Germany, it is the label with the least stringent criteria. For some, the Bio-Siegel is not really organic when compared to the higher standards of Bioland, for example. One of our interviewees is convinced that:

For me, the Bio-Siegel is borderline. It is a compromise – being organic but at the same time allowing for more than 45 different additives in production. That's why people can buy products with a Bio-Siegel also in a discounter or in other conventional grocery stores . . . I'm personally going for Demeter and Naturland, because these are the strictest organisations. Take Demeter, for instance. You would not find any allowed additives, no input that cannot be found in nature. And that's the biggest difference.

It is tempting to argue that the Bio-Siegel is a watered-down version of the general organic idea. This is because some criteria of the label are rather vague, especially when considering that the Bio-Siegel “protects soil, water and air”, “stands for species-appropriate animal-husbandry”, or “reduces energy consumption and conserves natural resources” (Bio-Siegel, 2006, p. 8). Additionally, because Bio-Siegel products can consist of up to 5% conventional inputs, allow for certain additives and also can be found not exclusively in certain stores but also in regular supermarkets and in discounters such as Aldi and Lidl, one could argue that this does not serve the general organic idea. As one farmer put it, “it is the CEO sitting in his office and thinking, yes, let's follow suit and launch some organic products”.

Yet it is important to look at the Siegel from another point of view. As many more organic products are available in the market today and sold at discounters, organic products are accessible to more consumers, and especially also to those that would not normally consider buying organic produce. The deputy spokesperson of the BMELV calls the Bio-Siegel “a complete success story”, as the number of products bearing the Siegel is still increasing today, after more than 10 years of its launch on the market. Undoubtedly, the Bio-Siegel is the most widely used and the most popular organic label in Germany,

with recognition on side of the consumer being supposedly relatively high. As the deputy spokesperson put it,

Thanks to the Bio-Siegel consumers can rely on a state-based label that makes it easier for them, and even enables them, to choose a product that stands for organic production methods also paying attention to the well being of animals. Out of a multitude of products they can pick the products of which they know how they were produced.

Additionally, some of our interviewees who have a Demeter or Bioland background confirm that the organic idea becomes increasingly disseminated by the Bio-Siegel. Because more consumers encounter organic products, they might be tempted to taste them once, and eventually might start to consume them on a more regular basis:

I don't see why the Bio-Siegel should be a competitor of ours. I think that – at the end of the day – it is good that there's a Bio-Siegel and a Demeter-label, for instance, and that the consumer can decide himself what he wants to purchase. The consumer must have the right to choose.

When the Bio-Siegel was established in 2001, some farmers were furiously saying that the “Künast-Siegel” betrays the overall organic idea. Yet the Bioland and Demeter associations interpreted the Siegel as an opportunity and chance to expand the organic market in Germany, as a means “to support the labels of the organisations which already exist” (Bioland, 2001). In line with the argument made above, they also believed that the Bio-Siegel was a way to lead more consumers towards organic produce and in particular, those that have never heard of it before.

Different from the two organic farming associations, Bio-Siegel's credibility tool of communication strategy is restricted to delegation. The Bio-Siegel is a state-owned label. Therefore, the drafting and introduction of it was mainly state-based, with the criteria defined by the BMELV with its minister Renate Künast. There was criticism that the public was not involved when the standards were drafted, and that there should have been more transparency. It is also argued that the Bio-Siegel has a highly complicated participation procedure, meaning that farmers have to consult the government, which must decide whether it proposes the suggestion made to the authorities in Brussels or not. Estimates show that “it would take two or three years to change the regulations, even if all went smoothly” (Amstel, Driessen, Glasbergen, 2006, p. 7).

However, Dubuisson-Quellier and Lamine (2008) make clear that mechanisms of delegation are not necessarily inferior to mechanisms of empowerment. Rather, the two different methods are suitable for different groups of consumers. Hence, also delegation can be a powerful tool in consumer involvement. Germany already had to comply with Regulation (EEC) No. 2092/91 on organic farming since 1991 (European Commission, 2011). However, it was only with the introduction of the Bio-Siegel in 2001 that consumers were actually being informed about this standard. This hexangular symbol was to show consumers that a certain product complied with the EU organic food standards. The Bio-Siegel therefore visualises the stipulations of the 1991-regulation. Since the national label highly increased consumer information, the Bio-Siegel can be considered as effective in regard to communication strategy.

The *Ökobarometer* of 2010 supports the latter statement. It showed that consumers know what the Bio-Siegel is, what it stands for, and what they can expect from the products labelled with it. Consumers who buy organic produce follow their personal credo of “once organic – always organic”, and use the Bio-Siegel to make their decisions. All in all, trust in the Bio-Siegel among German consumers is high. It is important to realise that *all* organic products in Germany are labelled with the Bio-Siegel, also those that comply with the standards of Demeter, or Bioland. The main difference is that the latter products additionally carry the association’s labels. Yet, all organic products in the first place bear the Bio-Siegel and comply with its standards.

In 2007, the EU organic food regulation was reformed. Since July last year, it is obligatory for German organic products to bear an EU-wide organic food label with the shape of a green leaf of stars on green ground. The label was introduced to create more uniformity, and aims to replace the national organic labelling schemes, including the Bio-Siegel. As it stands now, organic products are allowed to carry both labels, the label of the EU and the Bio-Siegel. While the idea of having a uniform label is generally a good one as it would diminish the proliferation of labels in case all national schemes would disappear, it is unlikely that the EU label will prevail, as the deputy spokesperson of the German Federal Ministry for Consumer Protection (BMELV) believes: “Consumers in Germany so far pay little attention to the EU label but always look out for the Bio-Siegel. The Commission is not promoting it enough, and it does not explain to the public what the label represents. The popularity of the Bio-Siegel won’t diminish”.

Therefore, the Bio-Siegel as such plays the biggest role in assuring the consumer of organic principles. Credibility building takes place on behalf of the state, which is the main actor to provide guidance, answer questions, and educate the citizenry about the Bio-Siegel. In accordance to this, retailers such as Aldi and Lidl always refer to the state when

it comes to the label, as can be seen on their web pages. Personal or expert advice on site are rare, because regular supermarkets usually also supply conventional produce and the personnel are not trained sufficiently to provide background information on organic food. The contact between consumers and farmers is less direct and less intensive. Therefore, consumers rely more on the label as such, and on the information on the label they have received earlier, which is almost exclusively provided by the state – with rich material to be found on the internet.

In order to keep the promises that the Bio-Siegel gives to the consumers, there are checks conducted by state-mandated yet private and independent agencies once per year. They visit the entire production facilities and go through the records of the farm, which the farmer is asked to always keep updated, to enter expenses, means of production, and output. These controls aim to prevent infringement of the regulation on organic farming and in the worst case can withdraw the permission to place the Siegel on products (Bio-Siegel, 2006, p. 6). Hence, the annual control is the same as for Demeter and Bioland-operated farms. However, the quality control of the Bio-Siegel only relies on the credibility established by the state, as consumers are not encouraged to directly interact with retailers and producers. This illustrates the delegation-approach the Bio-Siegel adopted.

Conclusion

With our chapter we introduced the concept of political producerism as a complement of political consumerism. We coined this term in order to account for the political producer and retailer networks behind labels which are necessary to make them work. Our case study on organic food labelling in Germany showed that labels have a higher potential to establish credibility if there is trust and dialogue between producers and consumers. In such a network labels can function as a bridge between the farmer and the consumer. While it is the label that communicates quality, it is the network behind it that enables the label to do so. As became clear in the case study, such networks can be built up both by the state and by private actors.

Even though all labelling schemes analysed in this paper unite behind the common idea of organic farming, they constitute three distinct producer and retailer networks. They mainly distinguish themselves in the way they employ the three credibility tools introduced, namely guiding narrative, communication strategy and quality control. The three networks engage in political producerism by establishing credibility around different guiding narratives. Whereas Demeter is characterised by *Ganzheitlichkeit*, Bioland focuses

on a hands-on-approach, and the guiding narrative of the Bio-Siegel is inclusiveness, meaning organic products for everyone. As the labels differently interpret the focal value of organic food, they provide the consumer with the possibility of supporting with his purchase a distinct form of organic farming. Hence, the consumer is empowered to engage in *buycotts*. It became evident that all three labels do not work independently, but serve as a representation of trust created by a political producer and retailer network behind the label.

As has been acknowledged in this chapter, organic food controls can never provide a guarantee that consumers are not being deceived. Yet, the crucial difference between organic and conventional food producers is that the former allow independent third parties to check their quality claims. While the conventional food industry uses marketing slogans to turn their products into something healthy or environmentally friendly, the organic food sector has to prove that its products meet such claims. This makes both unjustified quality claims and scandals far less likely. By clarifying and proving what their products stand for, producers and retailers enable consumers to make an informed choice. Hence we identify political producerism to be a precondition for effective political consumerism.

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