

Eating Happy Pigs

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ABSTRACT

Although Denmark is a country with high levels of meat consumption, especially pork, a revolution in the production and marketing of meat products was triggered off by scandalous revelations, further exacerbated by media reporting. The new “green” revolution reached political dimensions and became the focus of marketing campaigns. This article questions the basis of the ideology underlying the movement.

INTRODUCTION

Danes are among the highest consumers of meat in Europe, yet they are also among the first to blame the production methods of industrial farming. Under a climate of suspicion the Danish traditional agricultural model is being questioned as to its breeding conditions, and this has created a major increase in the demand for organic products, whose success can be dated back to a famous scandal which shook public opinion in 1995 regarding

the use of antibiotics in pork. The particularly watchful and anxious public attitude could be explained by the way all the media presented the news, appealing more to emotion than reason. The campaigns against industrial breeding have been led by Danish animal protection associations, the media and various institutions, who have all been vital protagonists in the development and coverage of “green” production systems.

This “green” trend is also due to the ability of its key actors (farmers, butchers, cooks) to control their image and play along with the media in a totally innovative trend in a country where cooperative action is deeply anchored in mentalities. It is said that “green” agriculture has reconciled the Danes and their farmers, uniting them in a unanimous quest. More officially, this has led the whole society into a process of “becoming green”, in a strong drive to express a specific Danish identity for fear of cultural dissolution within the European Community.

WHAT IS GOOD TO EAT?

In the early nineties, a change of attitude was perceived over what Danish people agreed to eat. As a main export country, Danes used to be satisfied with what was left after export of valuable foods such as bacon and butter, but a totally new and increasing demand of the population for better quality meat appeared. It expressed the success of organic breeding and its “green products”, designing new criteria of choices for meat. What we are actually witnessing is a new critical attitude towards agriculture, and more particularly towards the meat it can market.

It is a peculiar phenomenon, at odds with the tradition of gratefulness to the farmers who made possible the current well-being of Danish society and who have to face this present national reassessment of an agricultural system which has long been a matter of national pride.

The media played an important role in promoting this new environmentalist trend.

The increased demand for meat in Denmark has made it an ordinary, standardised food, more than 90% of which is sold in supermarkets, pre-packed in plastic wrap. The most common product is ready-to-eat minced

meat of any kind, often sold as meat-balls, sometimes already seasoned, with preference given to pork (1/3 of sales). It is part of the very basic foods of Danish cuisine, together with potatoes and rye bread. Vegetable consumption is fairly low: they have a symbolic rather than a necessary function, in part because although they are perceived as healthy they are also seen as “rabbit food”, unsatisfactory for humans.¹

The organic trend

In the mid-nineties, the organic food movement suddenly appeared and was compared to a “tidal wave”. Foreign observers can confirm the rapid success of organic agriculture and its steady growth ever since, especially in comparison with other countries like France, where the organically cultivated coverage has not increased as rapidly.

Traditionally limited to specialised shops, organic products can now be found in any supermarket, where between 70% and 80% of the production is sold. Rather than Danes’ genuine willingness to spend more money or to commit themselves to environmentalism, marketing conditions, increased availability of organic foods and their sudden financial and commercial accessibility² has contributed to this massive ecological trend, which has surprised the whole agribusiness with its suddenness and scale. Thus organic foods, and more particularly organic animal products, are still considered scarce. In Copenhagen, the sight of empty organic food stands in supermarkets is common. Some grocers have even developed a system of ordering in advance and reservation for organic milk in order to “share it equally among all customers”.³

One of the characteristics of this Danish organic food movement is the central focus on animal products. Technically we are beyond strictly defined organic agriculture and entering what is commonly named “green products” and “green agriculture”. These terms underlie an interest in animal welfare and the conditions of animal produce farming which in Denmark can definitely be dated back to a scandal in 1995. It occurred following a report from the UK that disclosed the consequences of systematic use of antibiotics in the production of pork. Not only was it causing in the animals a disease resistant to treatment, but residues of antibiotics were present in the meat

and thus ingested by man. “With this use of antibiotics man runs the risk that antibiotic traces can be found in the chops he eats or the milk he drinks” (*Politiken*, November 20th, 1994).⁴ Thus a direct link was made between intensive breeding with increased use of medicinal products, and man consuming the meat. The problem had already been raised in 1979 with a poster campaign which actually announced: “Danish pork is healthy, it contains penicillin”, needless to say, the billboards were removed and the campaign forbidden.⁵ This episode created a “biological scare” and definitely promoted organic foods, at least in the conscience and imagination of consumers, as healthy and quality products not treated chemically. Certain political parties that were focusing on the subject and bringing it into political discussion took a position in favour of organic agriculture.

Risk and safety

It is a central theme in a welfare state such as Denmark, though the gap between feelings of fear and safety is a narrow one: “one that is positive and the other negative end up by rejoining one another” (Delumeau, 1978). This food scandal appeared in a climate of catastrophe concerning food and risks,⁶ actively transmitted and maintained by the newspapers.⁷ It created a psychosis that can be observed in the newly developed hygienic behaviour within the “family kitchen”. The predominant concern at all levels of Danish society is about how food is produced. The wish for a better “up stream” control of the food chain seems to have found its expression in the unanimous success of organic foods in Denmark today. In that respect the ecologist movement appears as an extension of hygiene concerns. As Corbin mentions: “Without a good knowledge of the history of distaste and purification in past centuries, we would be unable to explain the importance assumed today by the ecological dream”. (1986: 270)

The meat of well-being

Organic food requirements are first of all for a “pure” meat, free of all substances which could harm the eater, as the only option for health-conscious people.⁸ Organic milk “not toxic in the udder” (*NNF-arbejderen*, 10, 94:

40), and organic cheese “made from nitrate-free milk” are requirements in continuing the production of the first meat with a quality label in Denmark: that of the Antonius pig, certified as being bred “without hormones or antibiotics”. Organic agriculture is described in a text aimed at French readers as “an experiment of a non-poisonous agriculture”. Organic foods are pure, and it is the name used by certain labels (*den rene vare*).

One of the seven “green butchers” who set up and controls a short meat circuit, mainly pork, insists not on the specific and very constraining organic quality of animal food but rather on its “natural” aspect – that is, rearing it without using animal food supplements: “their well-being is more important than that they are fed organic carrots”. The meat takes on the taste of what the animal eats, or rather, what it does not eat. More generally it tastes the same way as the animal has lived and been treated: “It’s not that difficult: the better it lives while growing, the better the meat!” adds this “green butcher”. This idea is defended by other brands of meat with slogans such as “the animal with a good life will be better”, “the healthy animal gives a healthy meat”, “a happy animal tastes better”, “the happy pig” (*Den glade gris*) or “the meat of well-being” (*velfaerdskoed*). The wish for better breeding conditions actually aims at insuring animal happiness for a better meat.

“Most of us wish for a chicken with a happy life, in short, a chicken that we can enjoy with a good taste in the mouth”. In choosing meat, the important thing is to avoid the after-taste left by meat produced by intensive breeding. The concept of “bad conscience”, extensively used to motivate the consumer to buy the more expensive “alternative” products,⁹ recalls an ethic of sin and guilt; as mentioned by St. Hugh-Jones (1996), “it presents the added advantage of underlining the existence of a wide margin of individual freedom, in particular concerning food preferences and behaviour towards animals”. Bad conscience is as much on the side of “traditional” breeders as on the consumers who would not buy “organic”. Debates, speeches and slogans, reinforced by the media, tend to develop guilt in the consumer “who would not be ready to pay more so that the animals could have better living conditions”. This play on guilt, the strength and weight of this look of society that stigmatises deviant consumption, plays a part in the conversion and education of Danes to organic produce and animal well-being.¹⁰ “A pork

roast must be savoured in all good conscience”, stresses the Director of the Danish Animal Protection Society (APS) (*Dyrenes beskyttelse*).

“Popular pressure must insure change, even if it costs more” was a militant saying back in 1979 (Riis Bosjen). The campaigns carried out by Danish APS”, within the media or through various other institutions, have had a major part in the reorganisation of animal breeding and materialising “green breeding” in this country. Chickens, the symbols of industrial agriculture in Denmark,¹¹ were the target of the Danish APS’s numerous campaigns for several years, both in Denmark and within the European Community, aimed at institutions and professionals (Schools of Agriculture, veterinary clinics, engineers, etc.) in order to forbid battery-raised hens.¹² There were also protests against battery-raised chickens, such as the one giving “the recipe for the chicken you ate yesterday”, describing in detail all the conditions of industrial breeding. The Danish APS has thus obliged the largest chicken breeding firm to offer a compromise by establishing a new “standard chicken”, the “scrapping chicken” raised according to “a plan of ethical action”.¹³ Meat labels have thus become associated with animal welfare organisations, whose “recommended by...” labels have become a sign of quality. These organisations have thus had a central role, that of the new directors of Faith, for the production of this “legitimate” meat (*ordentlig*), partly occupying the place of a mythical figure in Denmark: that of the veterinary surgeon.

All the parameters brought forward in the definition of “animal well-being” making “good” meat possible are a direct response to consumer criticism voiced through militant animal welfare associations. One of the criteria is the space available to the animal. Each half inch “won” for pig “boxes” is systematically heralded, as is access to grazing space for dairy cows. Straw is back to insure animal comfort. The respect for animal nature, or the “real” animal to quote F. Poplin – such as is expressed in the campaigns – is linked to the insistence on body integrity (campaigns to forbid tail cropping in pigs, tooth filing, castration and the removal of horns). Transport of pigs and slaughtering conditions are also mentioned. From the extreme dependence of the animal on man in industrial production, contemporary criticism demands respect towards wealth-producing animals at the foremost of ethical considerations.

The “green” movement claims to be an animal liberator. To convert to organic production is to give back freedom to animals, to break their chains: “We have liberated our pigs” or “We have let our pigs loose” is a common slogan. In contrast with the French, Danish organic husbandry charts integrate *de facto* ethical aspects. The brand *Okokod* presents organic husbandry first of all as “the respect for a correct and appropriate animal life”. Since the revised rules for organic animal husbandry in 1988, the ethical requirement has gained strength, and to such an extent that animal welfare societies sometimes judge it too constraining. The leaflets of the Danish Agricultural Council (*Landbrugsraadet*) aimed at schools have to stress the fact that “there is not necessarily a link between ecology, environment and animal well-being”. The predominant notion of welfare in animal breeding on actual organic quality can also be explained by the key role of this concept (*velfaerd*) in Denmark. The welfare state for all is to be extended to animals. This trend is the radical expression of domestication in which J. P. Digard sees the “raison d’être” in the “image it feeds back on power over life and over beings”. (1990: 215) Related to the principle of authority in Danish society, the nature of this change in that rapport has insured the massive success of organic animal welfare husbandry. As A. G. Haudricourt (1962) mentioned, choices in matters of domestication depend on societal choices. Animals catalyse and justify the whole political system, illustrating the idea that “domestication is the archetype of other types of subordination”. (Thomas, 1985: 55) “Recognising rights to individuals who have none is a testimony of our real humanity”, is a repeated expression. Animals, children, the handicapped and the elderly are examples of this practice. Good living conditions return us to the welfare state, Danish style, without human or animal exploitation, linked to the egalitarian ideal ever present in this society. The purity of “zero residue” of organic meat goes side-by-side with the product’s moral purity. This moral principle reintroduced in the exchange is founding a new social solidarity as expressed by B. Kaloara. (1991: 156)

GREEN TALK

This “green” success can also be explained by the capability of its various actors (breeders, butchers, cooks) to manage their image and play with the media. This completely new approach in a country deeply marked by cooperative associations, made it possible to claim that organic agriculture has reconciled the population with its farmers. Communication is important if you are to succeed as an organic farmer. The organic farm of Brinkholm south of Seeland organises barbecues so that customers can appreciate the taste of the organic meat of the pigs they breed. On the collective exploitation of Svanholm, there is a special group in charge of public relations and the organisation of visits to the farm. This is in harmony with the image of transparency and the reassuring idea of an ancestral, family idea of farm production. Green products are accompanied by didactic information. Quality is not only visible, it is readable, imaginable, one of its aspects being the fact that it has a “history”. The consumer does not just buy meat: he also buys the image of an animal, the story of its life, the description of what it ate, and even sometimes an account of the Danish environment it grew up in. This ideal of transparency is helped by modern techniques of video, newspaper articles and so on, as well as the almost continuous opportunity to visit the organic farms. The various actors can boast of control of the whole food chain “we follow our animals from field to table” (*fra jord til bord*). “Green butchers” and the other actors are new guarantees, and the label *Okokod* insists on the fact that “one of the main aims of organic breeders is to guarantee the respect for animal behaviour and natural needs”. In order to personalize the product (meat, cheese, eggs), the photo of the breeder, or his name, or the picture of a “typical” farmer, is shown next to it, and sometimes even two or three words about his commitment. In a society disconnected from its production process, organic or “green” production allows the consumer to place himself in a chain that extends from the fields to the supermarket.¹⁴ As an urban phenomenon, the green movement is supposed to wake up “the inner farmer” hidden in each Dane (*Weekendavisen*, October 25th, 1995) and apparently reduces the distance between farmers and the rest of society.

Words play an important part in this movement. Organic farmers have shown great mastery of speech and situations, as well as marketing techniques

often unknown to the traditional agricultural world. Some of the ones I visited belong to a very international “milieu”. They know how to take advantage of very wide networks, and sometimes even organize summer camps for youths from all over the world. The personality of some of those farmers also explains their success. Sven Nybo Rasmussen is very effective with the media. A former university lecturer, he has convincing information and knows how to speak in public. He gives conferences on agro-biology and is always present at official events on the subject (IFOAM ’95). He knows how to play on his former profession: “From his medical studies and practice, he knows that these products are cancerous and he is certain that it has an effect on fertility: more and more people have trouble having children, and it can also be observed with animals” (*Adresseavisen Kalovig*, July 5th, 1995). As for the media, his commitment takes on a new direction, breaking with idealism when it is useful for the promotion of his products.

There is something really new in these communication strategies operated by the organic movement, and it is also a way to re-conquer one’s own national market. These farmers are in fact the first to pay attention to Danish consumers: they know how to listen to them and how to speak to them. They fulfil a provider function which had been lost. What had been asked of farmers in the great Danish export agriculture was not to feed the Danes, but to bring in money. The importance given to exports introduced an early de-localisation of the food system, and a strict separation of products for export and those for home consumption. It is in this link between nature and territory, sharpened by the current trend towards “local heritage” in Europe, which is difficult to satisfy in Denmark, that the organic movement intervenes.

The wish is to see in the organic trend the breakthrough (*Samvirke*, August 1996) of a discriminating, intelligent, committed, responsible, powerful consumer militating for his convictions by buying organic. The political force of the consumer is linked in Denmark to the “street parliament”, who by boycott forced companies of battery-produced eggs to a complete reorganisation, a demand which caught the agricultural world totally unaware.

For the Scandinavian who often has “a militant soul” according to M. Gravier (1981: 228), organic agriculture has become the expression of all utopias. Events around organic production have blossomed like many small

insurrectional occasions: loudspeakers, speakers haranguing the crowd, as in the small organic market held in spring and summer on *Blagardsplads* in the northern part of Copenhagen. Militancy is often at the bottom of a choice for organic produce, and the high prices sometimes lead to reorganising the diet. Under it all, there is the dream that this so-called political consumer should be able to impose his views everywhere, that “ecological thought will expand” (“*Den oko tanke breeder sig*”, *Politiken*, September 11th, 1996). “In these past years the political consumer is visible in all industrialized countries, but nowhere as massively as in Denmark. The Danish consumer will be the forthcoming model for other countries’ (*Berlingske*, 25/06/95). Organic agriculture appears to be a goal for society: “After years of idealism and individual action, organic agriculture has won a central place” (*Berlingske*, August 1st, 1996).

THE “GREEN” COUNTRY: A PROJECT FOR SOCIETY?

This shared belief has been relayed at a more official level in a process of a “green u-turn”, conferring identity to a society fearing a fading existence in the middle of Europe. Ecological thought is considered to be “historical”. It is presented as a new challenge, in the same line as the great reforms of the past century, and in harmony with the idea that the strength and success of Danish agriculture resides in the fact that it was able to overcome constraints: “Agriculture is now confronted with something as breathtaking as when we started sending our bacon to England” (the Minister for Agriculture H. Dam Kristensen, *Press*, 119, 1995). An additional reason for the ecological success is that the expression of the quality of organic produce is shared at government level. “We must come out of our hole, the possibilities are immense” says the same minister. Denmark is conscious of the fact that it inspires confidence and trust in matters of environment and ecology and has made it “a matter of labelling, while other countries do not pay much attention to environmental issues” (*Politiken*, April 10th, 1996). This image of a green and cautionary Denmark has been promoted by the various European media, which systematically praise the so-called dynamism of Northern European countries (Germany, Denmark, etc.) in these matters. The fact that Denmark specialises and advertises itself as

a “green” country is not new (*cf. Réalités danoises*, 1977). Considering the equation “ecology=quality” some have a further vision beyond the contemporary implication of the state in financial aid to re-conversion¹⁵ and see in organic agriculture a possible opening for a long-term Danish specialization in this type of produce.¹⁶ Danish agriculture is in fact trying to find new exterior outlets. Since the alignment of European countries to the same set of norms for hygiene and quality, it fears the loss of its status as the “country of quality”, the main selling argument on which its success in exports depends. “To better manage the environment is also to ensure a decisive advantage over competitors, in a context where security, silence, the absence of pollution and organic quality of the products acquire economic value”, says J. Theys (*Kaloara*, 1991: 131). An interview with the agriculture minister H. Dam Kristensen confirms this point of view (*op. cit.*):

- Danish requirements in matters of organic production, attention to environment and animal welfare go together with enormous export potential.
- You mean to say that we can be Number 1 in the world for organic agriculture? That producing organic goods can bring in wealth?
- Yes, it is not a fashion: it is a new spirit of the times. It is not in vain that World Wide managed to mobilize people against French nuclear trials. People are worried.

“Here, environmentalists are not there for philosophical reasons, but for reasons of interest”, concludes a French report (Chambres d’ Agriculture, 852, 02/97).

If one should not neglect the fact that in Scandinavian countries “events which in other parts would be considered as limited can acquire a disproportionate importance for their causes” (Boyer, 1993: 498), organic agriculture and more generally the “green” movement appear to channel the preoccupations of a whole population. As G. Heller demonstrated how Switzerland could adhere to the notion of “a country of cleanliness”, Denmark seems to adhere to that of “a green country” in a process of a whole society turning “green” (Micoud, 1997). In fear of melting away in the midst of Europe, this refocusing on animal welfare meat allows the country to situate itself within a Europe of “cuisines and cooking heritage” further

south.¹⁷ “Consuming clean produce means installing a social classification between those who have the code for good behaviour and those who reject it through irresponsibility or refusal.” (Kaloara, 1991: 156)

NOTES

1. Actually, Danish nutritionists consider that the diet of the Danes is unbalanced, not because of too much meat, but because of too little vegetables and fruit.
2. Accessibility is a key concept in the Danish egalitarian ideology. It has been made possible by the introduction of discount organic foods through one of the supermarket chains which militates in favour of environmental conservation, as the latest issue of social militant action and better consumer health.
3. Against the fear of seeing unsatisfied customers turn back to “traditional products”, scarcity is an argument used to motivate militant action: through the media all the actors insist on the fact that keeping on buying organic is the only way to prevent its disappearance.
4. Similarly, the announcement that imported soy products (among them soy milk) could contain toxic aflatoxin reinforced the success of organic milk.
5. At the same time Denmark was noted for its tolerance, being the first country to liberalize pornography.
6. Danish favourite foods are assimilated to or compared to funeral symbols (graves, coffins) in the images used by the media.
7. These are in direct link with Danish society and give essentially emotional information. They are widely read, right from early morning at breakfast. A whole tacit daily knowledge is thus built upon their information. We can see in this what R. Boyer calls “their pedagogical mania, a permanent preoccupation, from the great educative systems to the detailed explanatory notes on tins” (1993: 488); and their will to be “informed” (“they would not tolerate not being informed”).
8. The success of the organic movement is based on the idea of particularly healthy foods (Grunert and Kristensen, 1990; GFK Denmark). For products not considered as potentially dangerous such as detergents, toilet paper etc., low price items are still preferred (*Helse*/11: 96); the same is true for products judged as “bad” by their very nature such as beer, or products felt to be intrinsically “good” such as vegetables.
9. “The consumer must decide how he wants the animals to live”; green butchers admit to selling their meat at high prices but “at least, for that price, the consumer can enjoy a chicken with a clear conscience, since the chicken had a good life, all 55 days of it”.
10. Child education, similarly, is learning laws promoting responsibility. This substitution to the principle of authority via a very strong interiorisation of norms is what the sociologist H. Dahl (1998: 11) calls “the hidden power somewhere in the anti-authoritarian façade”. These are “the notions of obligation and duty, consciousness of which rarely escapes a Scandinavian”, and they represent what R. Boyer (1993)

- calls “the quality and authenticity of his civic sense, his sense of responsibility, his respect of duty”.
11. Veal was the first animal to be the object of the Danish Animal Protection Association campaigns. It is possible that the old Danish distaste for this young meat led to this fact, and to the disappearance of this meat. The prohibition of battery raised veal in Denmark is overcome by exports to The Netherlands.
 12. After a campaign in 1994, certain supermarket chains decided to stigmatise these eggs with special labels, while others simply put an end to their sale. The year 1995 saw some spectacular bankruptcies of conventional egg producers suffering from overproduction. This type of intensive production will be forbidden in the European Community in 2011.
 13. More space to “move the wings, take dust baths and search in the straw” for 10 chickens per square metre instead of 24, which corresponds to French labelled chickens. Other improvements include “the possibility of resting eight hours, meaning, the light is switched off”, and a longer life time – which raises other problems of course.
 14. And to the participation of the consumer itself: one has to remember to shake one’s jug of non-homogenized milk.
 15. As an actor in the debate about the environmental quality of foods, the government has negotiated agreements between organic milk producers and classic producers, and found means to harmonize the price of organic milk with that of the general rates for dairy produce.
 16. Denmark was one of the first countries to adopt legislation on organic produce in 1987 (article No.4 of 7/01/88, law No. 363)
 17. At the same time as ensuring mastery of an economically profitable technology, as A. Comolet foresaw: “In this new game, we can bet that the Northern European States, and, in first place, Germany, will maintain the pressure, via the European Community organisations, in order to set up their supremacy in the production of organic products and technology under the cover of protection of the environment” (Comolet, 1991: 47)

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