



Not in my body: rBGH and the rise of organic milk

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Abstract. The advent of rBGH (recombinant bovine growth hormone) has spurred the establishment of an organic milk industry. The food systems/commodity chain analytical framework cannot fully explain the rise of this new food. An adequate understanding of the consumer's role in the food system/commodity chain requires more attention to consumption as a form of politics. One way to do this is to look at the politics of other new social movements, especially those contesting mainstream notions of risk. From this approach, organic milk consumption challenges rBGH from a "Not-in-my-Body" or "NIMB" politics of refusal, similar to the political refusal of neighborhood residents in "Not-in-My-Backyard" or "NIMBY" environmental movements. The NIMB form of politics is not a social movement of politically conscious consumers, yet it is still a political activity in which consumers participate in the formation of the industry through a process of "reflexive consumption." An analysis of producer-consumer discourse on milk cartons reveals the nature of this political formation.

Key words: Commodity chain, Consumption, Dairy, Food politics, Food systems, Genetically-engineered foods, Milk, Organic food, Risk, Social movements

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"It's exploded," say Joe Smillie of Quality Assurance International (QAI), a San Diego-based company that certifies organic products. "We're seeing more dairy products come through for certification now than anything else. It's obviously today's hot button" (Scott, 1997). This quote and others from the trade magazine, *Natural Foods Merchandizer*, describes the phenomenal rise of organic dairy products. The particular article that contained this quote, titled "Organic Dairy a Cash Cow," notes in particular the rise in sales of organic fluid milk.

While organic foods have been with us since the natural foods social movements of the 1960s (Belasco, 1993), the organic milk industry did not exist a decade ago. While organic food sales, as a whole, have been steadily rising over the last few decades, the rise in sales of organic milk has been nothing less than spectacular. It is the fastest growing organic food segment in the United States, the "star" of the organic foods industry. Organic milk has attracted trade industry attention, not only because of its rapid expansion, but also due to the unique nature of its market: "People who don't buy any other organic products are purchasing organic milk," states Katherine DiMatteo, executive director of the Organic Trade Association (Scott, 1997). Organic milk has infiltrated markets

other organics don't reach, possibly, some within the industry hope, becoming a gateway to expanded purchasing of organic food in general.

The statistics on organic milk's rapid rise are impressive. Financial analysts estimate sales growth to be 50 to 80% annually (Wyngate, 1999), with total sales of approximately \$60 million in 1998 (Scott, 1997). While organic milk is only a small fraction of the \$75 billion American dairy market, market analysts predict the strong rate in sales growth will continue, possibly reaching 2% of the market by 2002 (Murphy, 1999). In contrast, sales of organic products as a whole are growing approximately 20% a year.

Why this explosive growth from virtually nothing less than a decade ago? Trade journals and the mainstream media all mention one reason: rBGH, a genetically engineered hormone injected into cows to increase their milk production. Produced by Monsanto under the commercial name Posilac, this substance has been controversial since the Food and Drug Administration approved it in 1993. Nearly every popular and trade press article on the rise of organic milk mentions rBGH as the main reason consumers changed their consumption practices. For example, a January, 1999 *New York Times* article quotes one mother saying, "Milk is such an important part of a child's diet

... I didn't want my child to be a guinea pig," (Gilbert, 1999). A *Detroit News* article describes a natural foods store owner running out of organic milk on a regular basis, "Customers tell her they're buying the milk because of concerns about hormones and antibiotics in standard milk," (Hoover, 1996).

Yet, organic milk has another unique aspect: Unlike most organic food, consumer demand for organic milk arose without the significant social and political organizing – the food coops, the consumer-farmer coalitions – that created the organic food system over the last few decades. Many of the more mainstream organic companies – providing produce, grains, and processed products – began as small-scale firms dependent on a politically or nutritionally aware consumer who purchased food in alternative marketing channels such as coops or food clubs (Belasco, 1993). Since then, many of these alternative marketing organizations have been replaced by private stores and many of the products have moved onto the shelves of more conventional food retailers, such as supermarkets. Organic milk, on the other hand, did not go through this transitional "hippie food" period in which alternative food retail organizations and politically conscious consumers provided the incubator environment for economic growth.

Big business organic?

Instead, a major segment of the organic milk industry arose, fully-grown, from the heads of corporate executives and Wall Street investors. This is the final, and most critical, distinction between organic milk and the rest of the organic industry. While larger scale capital is entering the organic industry with great rapidity, most of the organic industry is still composed of firms that are smaller scale and less monopolized than their conventional counterparts. The organic milk industry, in contrast, is *more* concentrated than its conventional counterpart. If the claims of the top five companies in this sector are true (and it may be a bit hyped to convince Wall Street analysts), the five companies listed below serve 95% of the organic milk market. In fact, this table understates industry concentration, since the data was collected before Horizon purchased both The Organic Cow and Juniper Valley firms, leaving only three firms – Horizon Organic, Alta Dena, and Organic Valley – serving 95% of the organic milk market.¹

Horizon buys some of its milk from local organic farmers. However, 75% of its milk comes from two mega-dairy farms in Idaho and Maryland. The company bought the Maryland and Idaho herds, 5,400 cows, of Aurora Dairy, a multi-state dairying corporation that, until the sale, was the largest dairy producer

in the country (Looker, 1998). Horizon, in other words, is a vertically integrated dairy company, providing organic milk mostly by transporting it from its own two centralized herds numbering in the 1,000s of cows. In contrast, most conventional dairy companies, even the largest national firms, do not tend to own farms directly. They buy their milk from producers, mostly within the home market region.

Horizon Organic Dairy is also more national and multinational in its business operations than all of its conventional counterparts. It is a *global* fresh milk company (other multinational dairy companies generally sell canned or UHT milk), having just entered the Japanese market (*Dairy Products News*, May 3, 1999). It is partially owned by Suiza Foods, the second largest dairy processor in the US, which currently owns a number of regional milk firms. While Suiza and Dean Foods are certainly larger companies, Horizon is the only US milk *brand* (organic or conventional) that is national. Anyone familiar with the history of commercial food in the United States knows the importance of "branded" foods, nationally advertised products, with distinctive containers and centralized production systems. While branded foods have been with us for a long time, economic analysts note that, in this post-industrial food economy, branded foods have become the only types of food products large publicly-traded corporations want to own.

It is Horizon's ability to create a national organic milk brand that makes it unique. Nationally-branded milk corporations – Borden and Sealtest – which once served a significant proportion of the American milk market, withdrew from the fresh milk business in the 1970s.

Alden Manchester, USDA's dairy marketing guru, explained the national brand sell-off of conventional milk businesses by multinational firms: "[m]anufacturers of consumer goods derive much of their market power from product differentiation through brand preference." Large, publicly traded companies have mostly left the conventional market milk industry to cooperatives, because, "Wall Street now favors high-margin branded products. Commodity lines, which include fresh meat, fluid milk, natural cheese, canned fruit and vegetables, and raw sugar, were sold off rapidly in the 1970s by companies wishing to specialize in branded foods" (Manchester, 1983: 14–15). Milk and most other US dairy products are "bulk commodities" because they are generally produced according to national standards. As a result, most milk and milk products taste the same from one place to the next, making product differentiation difficult. Because, "[r]eal differences in flavor, texture, or quality are extremely helpful in creating brand preferences, ... [t]he creation of strong brand preference has

Table 1. Claimed shares of five largest organic milk companies.

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Horizon Organic | 65% |
| Alta Dena | 10% |
| The Organic Cow | 9% |
| Organic Valley | 6% |
| Juniper Valley | 5% |

Source: *Dairy Foods Magazine*, 1997.

never been easy for many dairy products” (Manchester, 1983: 36). The brand gives large corporations access to a profitable market niche in the fractured consumption society.

Yet, there is one small light in Manchester’s assessment of the future of dairy marketing: organic and non-rBGH milk. This product comprises one of the few opportunities dairy producers have “to market differentiated identity-preserved products” (Manchester, 1983: 41). In other words, the anti-rBGH movement – and, indirectly, Monsanto itself – has provided organic milk with its identity, exactly the kind of high-margin product identity necessary for the product to become a profitable Wall Street investment. Because of its ability to create a differentiated national brand, Horizon attracts investment capital.

The largest dairy processor in the US is Dean Foods, which owns the second largest organic milk company, Alta-Dena. Alta-Dena, a long-time player in the Southern California milk market, has been the subject of various sales and mergers. Dean Foods acquired Alta-Dena from Bongrain North America (a large French multinational). Therefore, both Horizon and Alta-Dena are owned by publicly-traded, multinational firms. Ironically, therefore, consumers buying organic milk may be passing over a smaller, cooperative, regional product to reach for the multinational, publicly-traded organic product.

Organic Valley (#4 in Table 1) is the brand name for the Coulee Region Organic Produce Pool (CROPP), a 160 farmer-owned cooperative in Wisconsin that sells its milk in 32 states, mostly in the Midwest market (*Dairy Foods Magazine*, 1997). It has also recently expanded its membership to the West and Northeast. It supplies milk to both Horizon and Alta-Dena. Compared to Horizon, Organic Valley’s market share is quite small.

In addition, urban milksheds with significant numbers of organic consumers also have regional organic companies serving their markets. For example, the San Francisco Bay Area has, in addition to Horizon, two local organic dairy companies. One, Strauss Family Farms, is a local Marin County-based dairy composed of two dairy farms. The other, Clover Stornetta

Dairy, is a Petaluma-based dairy processor. Both of these companies sell organic milk primarily in the San Francisco Bay area.

Market niche or political action?

The conventional corporate structure of most organic milk provision – as well as the fact that many of its consumers are “mainstream,” that is, they do not see themselves as drinking milk as part of any wider social movement – makes it easy to simply dismiss the rise of organic milk as simply another corporate “niche market.” In fact, recent work on the organic food system challenges the industry’s self-image as a philosophically alternative economy (Friedland, 1994; Buck et al., 1997; Guthman, 1998; Marsden and Arce, 1995; Kenney et al., 1991). From the perspectives of these studies, organic food production is simply another form of “Post-Fordist” capitalism, a form of production in which large-scale “business-as-usual” capitalist enterprises become more flexible than their earlier mass production equivalents, making them capable of meeting new consumption demands. The fracturing of consumption has created various market niches that include a demand for a form of food defined as “organic.” To provide this “Post-Fordist” organic food, producers find ways to meet certification standards while maintaining large-scale, intensive, less environmentally sustainable forms of agricultural production. The Post-Fordist organic food critique challenges the philosophy of the natural foods movement, which holds that consumers can change for the better the way food is made by demanding organic products (Belasco, 1993; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997).

The difference between these two perspectives centers on the role of the consumer in the structure of food provision. The philosophy of organic food described by Belasco and Whatmore (and see Vos, 2000) makes the consumer an actor in the politics of food. In contrast, the Post-Fordist organic perspective takes a Marxian point of view, locating politics in the relations of production that manipulates consumer demand for its own ends. In the case of organic food, the Post-Fordist firm will respond to consumer desires for particular food characteristics like “quality,” “made with care,” and “good for the environment” by mimicking the types of firms commonly associated with these characteristics, namely small, artisanal firms and family farmers. The consumer, in this framework, is either a victim of false consciousness or is part of an elite class of people who eat particular organic products as a way of displaying their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, one organic food often denigrated as a status food is “salad mix,” termed by

Buck, et al. as “one of the top yuppie commodities of the nineties” (1997: 16).

This Marxian analytical reading of organic food consumption is part of a larger framework commonly known as food system or “commodity chain” studies. The food system/commodity chain approach studies the institutional structure of food provision from producers, distributors, processors, transnational corporations, government agencies, and international trade organizations to the consumer. This perspective on agriculture and food, however, tends to approach the “consumption side” of food systems from a Marxian structuralist perspective: how we eat is a product of larger, macro-economic forces. Goodman and Redclift’s (1991) characterization of food consumption after WWII – “Food into Freezers, Women into Factories” – exemplifies this view, making changes in the food system part of an overall structural move bringing women into the labor force. Mintz’s (1985) study of the rise of British sugar consumption, despite its subtle weavings of class and culture, also attributes this change in the working class diet to changes in class relationships due to the rise of the industrial workforce. In this case, food is a product of forces, and eating reflects these forces. Recent studies of the post-fordist food system have portrayed new consumption practices as the product of a bifurcation of classes into (1) professionals concerned with health and the status of eating artisanal foods and (2) “everybody else” (Friedland, 1994; Marsden and Arce, 1995).

From this point of view, the consumer is not a focus of theoretical attention because she or he does not “act.” The definition of action, in this case, is collective, politically conscious action. For example, Marsden and Wrigley conclude their article on the retail food industry’s increasing control over the British food market by stating that the extent of consumer action in the future “will depend upon the development of the social and political consciousness of the consumers themselves. This in turn depends upon an ability to overcome the types of commodified individualism and positionality much of the contemporary system attempts to promote” (1995: 1911). Consumers have an “undeveloped” consciousness, which will continue to be undeveloped – i.e., unpolitical – until they challenge the commodity system. Likewise, *The Nation* disparages any concept of consumer as actor, calling all such activity “Tofu politics,” a degraded form of action in which individuals believe they can make a difference not through collective action but through shopping (Kauffman, 1991). This denies any politics to the act of consumption at all.

Despite its lack of attention to the consumer, the food system analysis of organic food describes and

explains a real trend in the industry. For example, Buck et al. (1997) provide an excellent analysis of how Post-fordist forms of organic production are furthered by an organic certification system that emphasizes specific “standards” – in terms of the toxic inputs not used – and de-emphasizes the pro-active “process” criteria of agroecological farming, such as care of the soil. A food system approach furthers our understanding of how a set of standards, originally formulated from a philosophy of small-scale, local production, can be captured by large-scale multinationals.

The standards vs. process approach to organic food certification certainly helps to explain the large-scale character of the organic milk industry. In dairy, one of the main challenges is the unprofitable waiting period a cow must be kept out of a herd after it is treated with antibiotics. Dairy cows are susceptible to a particular udder infection known as “mastitis.” Cows that are heavy producers, that are in large confined herds, and that are not let out to pasture – in other words, cows kept under industrial conditions – are particularly susceptible to this infection. While these infections can sometimes be kept under control with less drastic methods, a full-blown infection generally requires antibiotic treatment. Most organic dairy standards require at least several months of separation before a cow treated with antibiotics can be returned to the organic herd. In most cases, farmers find it too expensive to keep a treated cow. Therefore, the cow is generally culled from the herd altogether after treatment. To meet the standard, a farmer can pursue one of two strategies: (1) provide the cow with an environment that prevents the disease, generally residence in a smaller herd with access to outdoor space and pasture, while “pushing” the cow less to produce more milk, or (2) confine cows in a barn, which allows for larger herds, and treat the dairy farm as a quarantine system in which cows are milked until infection occurs, with a rapid turnover of cows.²

Whether a dairy producer pursues strategy #1 or #2 above is of no concern to the consumer, from the food system perspective. The consumer is either entirely fooled by dairy producers claiming to be philosophically committed and process-oriented while pursuing a quarantine strategy, or the consumer is unconcerned about the actual organic food production process as long as it functions as a cultural-capital display. Is the role of the consumer in the food system really this simple?

The rest of this article will attempt to find political action in the consumer’s role in the organic milk system. To do this will require a reformulation of the food systems framework to make the consumer more of an actor. New cultural approaches to consumption

have attempted to reformulate the role of the consumer in the current capitalist economy (See Miller, 1995 and Featherstone, 1991 for overviews). Those who use the food system framework are also increasingly questioning the common characterization of consumption within that framework. As a result, there have been a number of recent calls to incorporate more cultural perspectives into food system studies (Goodman, 1999; Marsden and Arce, 1995; Fine et al., 1996).

Organic milk provides a perfect case study for re-examining the role of the consumer in the politics of organic food. Organic milk, as mentioned above, was not part of the original organic food movement and many of its consumers are not members of any social movement around food. In addition, the presence of large-scale corporate actors in the industry (mega-corporations, oligopoly, merged firms, Wall Street, multinationals, and industrial farms), make it an excellent candidate for being the “poster child” of the food system/commodity chain perspective on organic food. In other words, if we can find consumer politics here, we can find it anywhere.

Not in my body as reflexive consumption

To fully understand the role of the consumer in organic food, it is first necessary to provide a framework that makes the consumer into a more complex, even human, being. One way to do this is to borrow from other sociologies, particularly the sociology of science, of the body, and of risk, that have in recent years treated people as actors who participate in the construction of society. A key component in this constructivist approach is social discourse, the process in which various actors make claims, create representations of the world around them, and contest the claims and representations of other actors. This process occurs in what some using this framework call “networks” (Latour 1986; Callon 1986; Thevenot, 1998) in which actors are continually embedded in an everyday politics that includes such strategies as enrollment, in which some actors, through discourse, attempt to bring other actors into their point of view. In relation to food systems studies, Goodman (1999) has called for a rethinking of the framework in terms of this “actor-network” theoretical approach. To fulfill the potential of this reformulation, however, requires a rethinking of the role of the consumer. Envisioning the consumer as having an active part in the creation of the food system requires thinking of the consumer as “reflexive.”

A reflexive consumer is not a social activist, nor is he or she necessarily committed to a particular political point of view, as espoused by other actors in the

network. The reflexive consumer does not necessarily ascribe to the ideologies of new social movements around food, and may evince characteristics of what Marxian approaches would identify as “false consciousness” – a tendency to be swayed by advertising, fads, status purchases, etc. However, the reflexive consumer listens to and evaluates claims made by groups organized around a particular food issue, such as GE foods, and evaluates his or her own activities based on what he or she feels is the legitimacy of these claims.

Reflexive consumers listen to, and sometimes believe, the claims of activist organic food groups. However, organic food activists are only one part of the network, and produce only one part of the dialogue of claims of that network. Reflexive consumers also pay attention to the mainstream media, public and private experts, the medical and alternative medicine establishments (including their own doctors and chiropractors), and – perhaps most importantly – their personal networks of friends and relatives.

Food is a particularly important focus for reflexive consumers, since food consumption is a negotiation about what a person will, and will not, let into his or her body. It is a question of: “Will I, or will I not, refuse?” In this way, as Allen and Sachs have noted (1993), the social movement most closely parallel to the sustainable food movement – and, by extension, the anti-GE food movement – is the “Not in My Backyard” (NIMBY) movement (or “syndrome” depending on your perspective). The NIMBY movement also begins with a refusal – to not allow toxic facilities into a resident’s local neighborhood. In parallel, the anti-biotech/GM food politics could be characterized as a “Not in my Body” or NIMB form of politics.

Comparing NIMBY and NIMB

There are many similarities and differences between NIMBY and NIMB. The most important one in this instance is the fact that NIMBY fits the traditional definition of a social movement while NIMB does not. NIMBY involves a collective refusal to have industrial *facilities* located in a neighborhood, while NIMB involves a controversy over the individual consumption of an industrial *product*. With adequate amounts of information – such as product labeling – NIMB could be carried out on a voluntaristic, individualist basis, whereas local facilities, once located, affect all local residents, involuntarily.

Yet, while NIMB cannot be considered a social movement in the same sense as NIMBY, the following discussion of their similarities indicates that they share some of what I will call “forms of politics.” Some of these forms are (1) a contestation of know-

ledge claims made by economically powerful actors and their experts; (2) attempts at enrollment of publics on one side or another of the issue, and the attendant threats to legitimacy when such enrollment is not successful; and (3) a risk politics that involves who will bear the brunt of possible risk burdens. The following discussion will look at each of these in turn.

Contested knowledge

In both NIMBY and NIMB cases, business, government experts, and scientists are in conflict with public intuitions about the “truth” about the safety of these facilities/products. In both cases, there are significant differences between “scientific” characterizations of risk and “popular epidemiology”: the cultural perceptions of risk (Brown, 1993). (The section on risk politics, below, will look more closely at the source of these cultural perceptions of risk.)

The rBGH controversy involves a widespread rejection of milk produced using this substance, despite a lack of scientific consensus that rBGH-produced milk is unhealthy. Without downplaying the problems of IGF-1 in milk produced using rBGH, it is clear that the scientific evidence on the risk of this substance is controversial. Risk claims about rBGH are made mostly by people outside the scientific establishment and by citizen publicizers such as Joel Cohen, author of the book, *Milk: The Deadly Poison* (1997).

Risk claims concerning the toxicity of strawberry production and consumption provide a good counterpoint.³ These claims are made by government and academic scientists who work well within the mainstream establishment. Despite the general mainstream consensus about the toxicity of, and potential human exposure to, the substances used to produce strawberries, the growth of the organic strawberry industry is not a “hot button” for industry analysts today.

Enrollment

Both NIMBY and NIMB challenge generally larger, often multinational, corporations to convince the public that their facility/product is “safe.” NIMBY traditionally, and NIMB increasingly, involves increasingly broad enrollment of various actors – various publics, government experts, university and private scientists – in broad, policy-related, civic discourses about what to “do” about these facilities/products. Neighborhood industrial facilities and food share the characteristic of being “local.” They both find us where we live. This proximity is magnified when the product in question is a (Northern European) cultural staple, like milk. For the many Americans, a refrigerator without milk is a reason to run to the store. Most Northern European

Americans have an intense relationship to milk, almost as intense as with wheat. The social history of milk shows that it is intricately tied to mainstream concepts of American identity (DuPuis, forthcoming). Even on the production side, milk is still a relatively local product, generally produced within a few hundred miles of the average consumer.

In both NIMBY and NIMB, the “actor” is not simply the activist. While the social movements prompting the initial refusal are important – necessary even – the *reaction* to that refusal brings everyone “to the table,” that is, into the field or network of discourse. The owners of a potential facility under attack by NIMBY activists do not respond simply to the activists, they address their communicative strategies to all local residents (Do *all* of you really not want this facility? Are all of you really refusing these jobs? Do you really believe these ill-informed extremists?) Politicians (state and local), the activists themselves, and other local groups attempt to enroll the average resident into the discussion (Do you really want to be poisoned? Do you really believe these big businessmen and the government officials in their pockets?). In the same way, those actors under challenge in the GE food discourse – biotech companies, government, agricultural research universities, and non-profit research institutions – do not simply respond to activist groups. Instead, they attempt to enroll regular consumers, and taxpayers, to their side or, at least, to neutrality on the subject. Leaders of these institutions know that their legitimacy is at stake, but that the average consumer will not necessarily challenge them directly on this issue. Instead, if the active enrollment of the mainstream public does not succeed, biotech companies, governments, institutions, etc., suddenly find themselves with mysterious, untraceable legitimacy “leaks” that result in a lower stock price, a strong election challenge, or a lack of critical support in other areas when crucial.

Monsanto’s current stock price, the result of a serious legitimacy leak in its agricultural sector, is one example of the eventual, but powerful force of the reflexive consumer. Ten years of apathy to anti-biotech activism in the US suddenly turns to a large scale withdrawal of support for Monsanto after European governments question the safety of biotech products. The reflexive consumer, suspicious of home-grown activists such as Jeremy Rifkin,⁴ paid attention when Europeans, and European governments, began to question these products.⁵

Risk politics

Both NIMBY and NIMB intrinsically challenge the acceptance of risk. Nevertheless, there has been little

work on understanding the risk politics around food compared to the enormous literature on NIMBY. A great deal of sophisticated theoretical grappling has occurred in attempts to understand public NIMBY reactions. The lack of theoretical attention to the NIMB public is in part due to its more recent arrival as a “problem” in the social landscape, with the expanding resistance to GM foods. But in part, this has also been due to the lack of attention to the consumer in food system studies. For this reason, people trying to understand NIMB would do well to look at the conversations that have taken place in the attempt to understand NIMBY.

There is a significant social science literature on the politics of risk, much inspired by attempts to understand the NIMBY phenomenon (See the articles in Krimsky and Golding, 1992; National Research Council, 1996; Beck, 1996; Perrow, 1984). One of the most important findings of these studies is that people rank risks according to their ability to control that risk, that is, the extent to which the risk is voluntary (Slovic, 1997, 1992; Perrow, 1984). On first glance, it would appear that the analyses of risk politics do not help us understand the voluntary purchase of organic milk. Food, like cigarettes, is a voluntary risk. However, when the food is a cultural staple – that is, deemed necessary by the predominant culture – control becomes a very important factor. If consumers believe that they, and especially their children, *have to* drink milk, then the potential unwanted exposure is nearly as involuntary as the siting of a local toxic facility.

Therefore, while the individual consumer is not a political activist, his or her consuming actions are embedded in a larger network of politics that includes The State, Science, social movements as well as the gendered politics of The Family (as in who decides what’s in the refrigerator). Like the risk politics of NIMBY, NIMB politics involve control. For consumers, part of that control includes purchase, and part of that politics includes demands for the provision – such as product labeling – upon which to make consumption decisions. Social movements also attempt to enroll consumers to perform political activities such as boycotts.

From this point of view, the consumer not only buys products but thinks about consumption both as an individual and as a member of a consumption network. As part of this network, the consumer will not only buy products, but will also engage in a public and private dialogue with other consumers, political activists, government experts, scientists, and others about the consumption decisions he or she is making. Therefore, even the purchases of consumers who are not overtly involved in food politics may contain a “form of politics.”

The concept of reflexive consumption provides a lens that enables us to see the politics in consumptive activities. In social constructivist fashion, reflexive consumption moves our search for power away from the consumer’s consciousness to the discourse surrounding the consumer in the world in which she or he acts. Interestingly, organic milk companies have initiated a new form of discourse with its consumers: the milk carton itself. For many years reserved primarily for pictures of missing children, organic milk companies have reclaimed that space for the producer-consumer communication work it does representing itself and its product (commonly known as “marketing”). In response, many conventional companies are following suit. The following discussion will analyze a few of these “talking” milk cartons, to understand the nature of the political discourse around organic milk.

The talking milk carton

The brand labeling on the organic milk carton “talks” to the consumer. However, an examination of the types of talk on organic milk packages indicates that there are a number of different claims being made and that the different organic and non-rBGH milk companies represent the farm, the farmer, the cow, and the consumer in significantly different ways. These different claims represent the different enrollment practices of actors in different positions within the market and within the contested discourse on food. The claims of organic companies fall into three major categories: consumer-as-authority, agrarian, or neighborly.

Horizon: The politics of consumer-as-authority

Horizon’s talking milk carton emanates friendliness. “You deserve delicious foods that are safe and healthy,” begins one Horizon milk carton. Right away, the consumer is made sovereign in the conversation. “This kind of quality begins right at the farm,” the milk carton continues, linking the consumer’s desire to the way in which the company treats nature. “And, by not using pesticides,” the carton concludes, “we keep them out of your family’s food.” The company is telling us it is on our side; it knows what we want and will provide it to us. It knows what we do not want, and will keep it away from us.

The major image on the Horizon milk package is the cute cow, or the “clean living cow” as one milk carton calls her. The package’s designer recently featured Horizon’s new “look” on its website. The challenge, they state, was that Horizon’s original package “wasn’t designed with a national audience in mind” (Publish.com, 1999). But with Horizon’s new

national market, and increasing emphasis on conventional distribution channels like supermarkets, it now “has mainstream customers in addition to its core of health food shoppers. Horizon is shifting its market strategy. The new target buyers of Horizon products are highly educated mothers” (Publish.com, 1999).

The cute cow is an American cultural phenomenon in itself, associated with the “soft” side of social provision (the family) as opposed to the “hard” side (capitalism). The Far Side cow jokes, the ubiquitous cow coffee cups, the Holstein dotted Gateway Computer packaging, all of these cute cows represent a friendly, controllable, yet natural, provision system, a sort of identity-based pastoral ideal. What is remarkable about the rise of cow images is the fact that cow images disappeared from milk advertising around the turn of the century (DuPuis, forthcoming). The major exception was Borden’s Elsie, who was more homemaker than cow. A recent Elsie nostalgia craze, as evidenced by the amount of Elsie memorabilia for sale on Ebay, reflects the current iconization of bovines.

The Horizon carton talk tells us how this cow lives, without pesticides, hormones or antibiotics, because, “[a]fter all, cows are mothers, too, and we watch our cows’ diet for the same reason a mother watches her own.” The cow and the consumer become one. The carton portrays a cute cow flying through the air. Far from the large, crunching behemoth one commonly finds in dairy barns, the cute cow emphasizes the friendly, non-threatening status of the food production system responsible for the milk in the carton. The cow represents the harmlessness of the milk – the quarantine side of organic – not the process by which the milk is made.

The uniqueness of the Horizon milk discourse becomes most obvious when compared to the more typical producer-consumer discourse around conventional milk. The conventional dairy discourse represents the quality of its milk according to claims of expertise and authority, as in, “We are the ones who know what good milk is, and you are the beneficiaries of this knowledge” (DuPuis, forthcoming). The “Got Milk?” campaign plays with this authoritarian discourse, with its imposing question and its mass-produced milk moustache on celebrities and figures of authority. Berkeley Farms, for example, is a conventional dairy that communicates to its consumer through the traditional authoritarian discourse. Its image of quality is not a cute cow but a “Seal of Excellence.” The seal represents a certification by a governmental authority of quality. The conversation on the carton reflects this authority discourse, talking not about cows or nature, but about their field managers as experts, who inspect dairy farms. The carton is telling us that we should trust the milk because experts are employed in its production. The milk is also superior, according

to the ad, because it exceeds state quality requirements. Finally, the ad announces that its independent dairy farmers are “nutritional ecologists” who provide “skilled husbandry.”

In fact, the Berkeley Farms ad gives a great deal more information about its milk production than the Horizon Organic ad. It makes a real commitment to extra inspection personnel, and it tells us that by the standard measures of bacterial contamination, it is very clean milk. It tells us where the farms are. However, compared to the “deserving” consumer of the Horizon Organic ad, the Berkeley Farm ad misses the mark in the current Post-Fordist milk discourse. The consumer wants control over the product, not assurance that other authoritative people are controlling the product for them. Of course, the idea of consumer control is a myth, but the cute cow masks the human system – the producers, the experts, the government agents – necessary to make the cow live “clean.”

Straus: Agrarian

Yet, not all organic milk companies represent their product in terms of cute cows. For example, the bottle talk provided by Straus Family Creamery, the small, local organic dairy company in Marshall, California, emphasizes agrarian issues. Straus’s glass bottles provide less room for talk, but the difference in message is clear. Buying Straus milk enables a family farm to continue in agriculture. “Dairy farms are disappearing at a rate of about 5% a year” states one bottle. “Going organic gave our family the chance to continue farming.” Another bottle gives a history of the dairy and ends with “Thanks for your support.” The consumer in this bottle talk is a small farm supporter. Both farm and consumer, in this talk, are pulling together for a particular vision of agriculture.

Like Straus, Organic Valley, the cooperative organic milk company, uses farm images on its cartons to represent its product. Cows appear on the carton, but they are not anthropogenic cute mom cows. The Organic Valley carton shows a pastoral scene, with a more naturalized (less human) cow in association with the farm family. This portrayal is reminiscent of the romantic pastoral images of the mid-nineteenth century, in which the tending milkmaid represented the care of nature (DuPuis, forthcoming). The Straus and Organic Valley dairy discourse emphasize agrarian values and cooperation between farmer and consumer, and farmer and nature, for a particular way of life. Yet, unlike the earlier “The Farmer Feeds Us All” ideology of agrarian populism, the new agrarian message is, “We can’t survive without you.”

Clover-Stornetta: Neighborly

Clover-Stornetta is a regional Bay Area milk company that sells both organic and non-rBGH milk. Although this company buys milk from a group of local farms around Petaluma, Clover-Stornetta does not emphasize the agrarian nature of its product. Instead, like Horizon, the company emblazons its milk cartons with a cute cow. The milk talk on the carton, however, does not address the consumer as sovereign, but as a neighbor. The cartons often announce local community events around the Bay Area, serving more as a community billboard than as a mouthpiece for the company. This emphasizes the localness of the company, compared to Horizon, which cannot make the same neighborly claims with the same legitimacy.

Reflexive consumption as a form of politics

How does the consumer respond to these claims? Is she or he an authority, a neighbor, an agrarian? Not necessarily. The reflexive consumer is an actor in a larger network that involves more than simply reading a milk carton. Is the consumer simply a victim of false consciousness, in which organic dairy companies fool them with visions of happy cows, saved farms, and neighborly communities? Not necessarily. The consumer is evaluating claims and acting on these claims every time they reach for a milk carton or bottle at the store.

For example, there is a growing awareness in the food activist community that the Horizon's Post-Fordist organic milk production strategy is politically incompatible with the political philosophy around organic food. As a result, there is a growing challenge to the way in which Horizon makes its organic milk. Recently, an Albany, New York-based consumer-farmer coalition called the "Regional Farm and Food Project" critiqued the Horizon organic milk model in its newsletter (*Regional Farm and Food Project*, 1999). At the end of an article on mergers and consolidations in the food industry, it advises: "Don't assume organic means unplugged [local] ... Horizon has two massive factory farms, one in Idaho and the other in Maryland, that supply a large proportion of its milk." Rural Vermont, a rural activist organization, also published a critical overview of Horizon in its recent newsletter (*Rural Vermont Report*, 1999). A national consumer food safety group, The Pure Food Campaign, in its electronic newsletter article titled "Organic Standards: Who Really Speaks for the Organic Consumer?" distinguishes between the "rank-and-file" organic movement and the "'Big Players' in the natural foods industry" (Cummins, 1998).

The newsletter accuses the big players of only lobbying on the parts of the USDA's proposed national organic rules that would maintain a separate identity for organic, but not preclude Post-Fordist forms of organic production.

It remains to be seen, however, what the reflexive consumer will do once (and if) they are confronted with a choice between the Horizon's quarantine organic milk production strategy and a smaller-scale, process-based alternative. Will consumers care one way or another? On a larger scale, what will consumers choose if the GM food industry actually creates a cheaper, more convenient, more nutritious, more delicious strawberry, maybe even one that can be grown without methyl bromide? What if that bomb of the GM industry, the Favr-Savr tomato, did actually taste good for several days longer than a regular tomato?

The answers to these questions are unclear. However, consumer action, faced with choices and claims, will be political.

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Notes

1. In contrast, the top 50 general food processing firms in the US represent 47% of sales (US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Survey of Current Business. Selected issues).
2. See Szasz (forthcoming) for an analysis of risk politics in terms of the elite's search for an "inverted quarantine."
3. The health and environmental risks of non-organic strawberry production and consumption has been broadly established, based on scientific evidence that is widely accepted by the established community of environmental scientists and toxicologists and categorized as such by the Environmental Protection Agency. Non-organic strawberries are produced with a variety of pesticides such as Captan. One in four strawberries has Captan residues on the fruit, along with a number of other pesticides, EPA lists Captan as a "probable human carcinogen" with a "B2" rating, meaning that the animal evidence is sufficient to indicate that a substance is carcinogenic. Such a rating means that you could get a significant proportion of scientists in a room to agree on the risks of Captan. In other words, compared to the controversial evidence around IGF-1, the risk science around strawberries is strongly "institutionalized": the substances consumers are potentially exposed to have specific

high-risk labels imposed by public institutions, reflecting a general consensus in the scientific community.

Finally, non-organic strawberries are universally grown using a soil fumigant, methyl bromide. This chemical has been declared an ozone-depleting substance by The Montreal Protocol, an international environmental treaty. It is also a "Category I acute toxin," which is the highest toxic category defined by EPA. The anti-rBGH movement paints the dairy industry as forcing a whitewash of the problems with IGF-1 and antibiotics in milk. While this is certainly possible, there is no incontrovertible proof that politicking got rBGH approved by the FDA. On the other hand, the series of delays on the ban of methyl bromide use, both internationally and in California, is clear, unabashed politics in public. This type of special political maneuver took place at a time when many other industries using ozone depleting chemicals were phasing out their use of these products ahead of schedule, including the large, politically powerful, chemical industry (Newman, 1994; Hinrichsen, 1996).

4. It is also worth noting that Europeans base many of their objections to GE foods to Rifkin's analysis (Stecklow, 1999).
5. It would have been interesting to see whether a non-European country could have had the same impact on Monsanto's stock price. Racism and the struggle for legitimacy are not necessarily separate issues. The reflexive consumer may not necessarily be a middle-class white person with a college education and European descent, but the enrollment discourse – below – will show that dominant actors often target this group. The loss of this group's support in many industry sectors spells disaster for the industry. As a result, the sustainable food discourse has generally ignored issues of race (Allen and Sachs, 1993).

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