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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Adapting to Contradiction:
Competing Models of Organization in the United States Organic Foods Industry

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Michael Anthony Haedicke

Committee in charge:

Professor Richard Biernacki, Chair
Professor Amy Binder
Professor Maria Charles
Professor David Serlin
Professor Kathryn Woolard

2008

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The dissertation of Michael Anthony Haedicke is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	v
List of Figures	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Vita	x
Abstract of the Dissertation	xiii
Chapter 1: Cultural Contradictions in the Organic Industry	1
Chapter 2: Cargill and Goji Berries: Uneven Rationalization in the Organic Industry	47
Chapter 3: Creating Alternative Economies: Industry Change and Collective Identity in Organic Foods Co-ops	105
Chapter 4: Converting Acres and Changing Culture: Vocabularies of Motive and Symbolic Boundaries in the Organic Industry	149
Chapter 5: Framing Motivations and Involving Consumers	199
Chapter 6: Conclusion	251
Methodological Appendix	264
References	293

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1:	Growth in the United States organic foods market	9
Table 1.2:	Characteristics of rationalized and humanistic models of organization	35
Table 4.1:	Environmentalism frames	169

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: NOP marketing denominations	67
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In his book *The Diversity of Life*, the biologist Edward O. Wilson describes a moment during a trip to the Amazon when the rain forest itself seems to sing. Of course, it is an illusion: the sounds of diverse species, each in their own walks of life, blend together and create the “voice” of nature. So it is with a dissertation. The polished authorial voice conceals the fact that much of the work of authorship involves harmonizing the contributions of diverse others. Without their growls, howls and bellows, the voice of the author would be puny indeed.

First in the chorus, I wish to thank the members of the organic foods industry and the other individuals who generously set aside time to participate in my research. I learned more than I ever thought possible about food politics, the grocery industry and organic agriculture from my formal interviews and my conversations with these people. Although I often felt unsure about what questions to ask, these respondents always responded patiently and in great detail. They also encouraged my interest in the organic industry. I would especially like to thank the members of the organic foods co-op who welcomed me into board meetings during my research. From my research, I developed a deep respect for the work of these industry members and for the diverse visions that they have of a cleaner, safer and more humane world.

I benefited from the encouragement and intellectual support of a fabulous dissertation committee during my work. Rick Biernacki, my advisor, provoked my interest in culture and economic life by inviting me to attend a special seminar in the

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VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Adapting to Contradiction:

Competing Models of Organization in the United States Organic Foods Industry

by

Michael Anthony Haedicke

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, San Diego, 2008

Professor Richard Biernacki, Chair

This dissertation contributes to a developing conversation between social movements scholars and organizations researchers by investigating the influence of different cultural models of organization in the organic foods industry. Within this field of activity, the model of market efficiency promotes highly rationalized organizational forms. On the other hand, the model of humanism advocates personal and community development through participatory organizations. The dissertation analyzes how industry members and the organization that they run respond to these different models of organization. Market growth during the 1990s and 2000s propelled the organic industry in the direction of rationalization. This was especially evident in new legal structures that standardized the definition of organic production, regulated the use of organic marketing claims, and channeled a significant amount of consumer and social movement activism into institutionalized channels. However, even in the

large grocery companies that now sell organic foods, rationalization remains uneven because these companies must respond to unpredictable features of the organic industry, the restructuring of the grocery industry, and campaigns organized by consumer activists. Models of rationalization have also affected the smaller, humanistically-inclined natural food co-op stores, whose leaders have used mechanisms of symbolic realignment, loose coupling and bricolage to maintain a countercultural identity while also adapting to a more competitive market. The competing models of organization also appear in organic industry members' explanations of their decision to work in the organic industry. While industry members generally agree that the organic industry is more environmentally beneficial than the conventional foods industry, they disagree about whether the ultimate goals of the industry should be the conversion of as much land as possible to organic management or transformation of the environmental consciousness of individuals. Finally, professionals show ambivalence about involving consumers in debates about the organic industry and about broader environmental politics. These findings contest the ability of scholars to draw clear boundaries between social movement and non-movement organizations and reassert the importance of culture in this growing field of research.

CHAPTER 1:

CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS IN THE ORGANIC INDUSTRY

At the beginning of 2004, Elizabeth Henderson, an organic vegetable farmer with over two decades of experience, addressed a regional conference of organic farmers with a stark challenge:

We must make a decision about our identity: are we an industry? Or are we a movement? The leaders of the Organic Trade Association and the bureaucrats at the National Organic Program like to refer to the “organic industry” ... Let’s look into our crystal ball at the future growth of the organic tree in a NOP regulated organic industry: Organic is the mainstream with fifty percent of the market! The three largest certification programs provide services for all but a few hold-out small scale organic farms. Horizon is crowding out CROPP/Organic Valley milk sales, putting downward pressure on payments to farmers. Tyson organic chickens, under a “cage-free” label like Horizon’s, are underselling small, free range chicken farms around the country ... New regulations for organic food contact substances allow for the manufacture of organic high fructose corn syrup, and organic Pepsi is climbing past fifty percent of market share. The former Monsanto executive who heads the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service has set the NOP allowance for GMO contamination at two percent. The few thick branches of this tree bear many green leaves, but only a select few enjoy their riches. Is this what you want?

In this keynote address, which was quickly reprinted and referenced in periodicals and books throughout the industry, Henderson challenged her audience in two ways. First, she asked them to consider whether the market-driven growth of organic foods was a positive development or a moral problem. Her speech contrasted symbols of market growth such as the Organic Trade Association, the USDA-administered National Organic Program (NOP), and food conglomerates like Tyson

Foods and PepsiCo with small, independent farms and farming co-ops like CROPP/Organic Valley. Second, Henderson challenged her audience to think of ways to place boundaries on market growth and to define an alternative to the dystopia she described. When her audience agreed by a show of hands that they did *not* want the kind of the kind of industry she described, she continued, “Ok, so we agree that we want to be a movement. What does that mean?”

This dissertation uses multiple qualitative methods to understand how members of the organic industry respond to these questions in practice. An extensive set of in-depth interviews with organic foods professionals forms the core of my data; I supplement the interviews with textual analysis of industry and popular media and with notes from participant observation at a variety of industry functions. I use the term “organic industry professionals” throughout the dissertation to describe individuals who make a living primarily from the production, distribution and sale of organic foods or other organic products.¹ These professionals work in a variety of organizations, from small, independent farms and cooperative natural foods stores to national food and grocery corporations.

In addition to dilemmas about what organic foods are and should be, the professionals that I discuss here face a long list of pragmatic concerns in the course of their daily work. As sales of organic foods grow in the United States, so does competition within the organic foods sector. One of the professionals that I interviewed for this study was struggling to extricate his organization from a near-

¹ I also use the phrase “members of the organic industry” as a synonym for “organic industry professionals”.

bankruptcy brought on by poor management in a changing market and others spent significant portions of their time figuring out how to respond to rapidly changing market conditions. In addition, skeptics question the legitimacy of the organic foods industry as a whole, suggesting either that organic foods are no different from non-organic (hereafter “conventional”) foods or that they actually expose consumers to greater risk of foodborne illnesses (DeGregori, 2004). Professionals in the organic foods industry frequently worry about how to communicate what they see as the benefits of organic foods without engaging in a war of words with critics that might leave consumers with a bad taste in their mouths. Finally, on an institutional level, professionals face shifting legal and regulatory definitions of organic food that determine how foods marketed as organic may be produced and treated and who is authorized to decide what is organic and what is not. Within this complex environment, the organic industry professionals are working to increase sales and build markets for organic foods. For many, however, this goal exists in greater or lesser tension with objectives of environmental improvement, grassroots control over the food system, or transformation of cultural attitudes towards nature.

My dissertation approaches the organic industry as a case study of how people negotiate and adapt to competing and potentially contradictory cultural priorities. I investigate this negotiation at the level of organizations, professional identities and relationships with consumers and the public. Unlike commodities such as steel or paper, organic foods developed from a critique of industrial production and mass consumption and gained popularity as part of the ecological counterculture of the

1970s (Belasco, 1989). As a result, organic foods are associated with goals that do not fit easily into the balance sheets of mainstream business, such as a cleaner environment, more humane treatment of animals, and transformation of the relationship between people and the natural world. This dissertation will show that many organic industry professionals assert their commitment to these goals, even while they also state that the organic industry can accomplish these greater goods only through consumer demand and success in the market. This is puzzling because sociologists often contrast visions of the public good advocated by social movements with the pursuit of individualistic interests in markets. The organic foods industry offers a key strategic site to study the relationship of market and non-market goals in our culture and to observe how these cultural frameworks play out in practice.

This chapter begins by offering a brief definition of organic foods and an account of the development of the organic foods industry in the United States. Next, it considers existing research about the organic foods industry, which often builds on the contrast between social movement and market-oriented activities present in Henderson's speech. I then situate my project in the context of literature that draws together social movements scholarship and organizational studies and I point out that this literature can be improved through an engagement with recent work on cultural institutions. These literatures contribute to the analytical frame that I have constructed in this dissertation. After presenting this frame, I describe my research design and methodology and provide an overview of the chapters to follow.

Organic foods: a background

What are organic foods? The answer to this question forms a foundation for my research, but it is not as straightforward as it seems. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which regulates organic foods production through its National Organic Program, explains that “organic food is produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations. Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic food is produced without using most conventional pesticides; fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; or ionizing radiation.”² The USDA definition emphasizes the absence of industrial technologies from organic foods production. However, methods of organic agriculture do not simply represent a return to a harmonious, pre-industrial era. Instead, they developed from the engagement of scientists and social reformers with perceived problems of industrial society (Conford, 2001; Gieryn, 1999, pp. 233-335).

This engagement appears in the work of European pioneers of organic farming methods. Sir Albert Howard, a British soil scientist, contrasted the composting methods that he pioneered on an experimental farm in Indore, India with the synthetic fertilizers that had dominated European agriculture since the late 19th century. In spite

² www.ams.usda.gov; accessed March 18, 2008.

of their supposed efficiency, he argued in 1940, these “artificial manures lead inevitably to artificial nutrition, artificial food, artificial animals, and finally to artificial men and women” (Howard, 1940). Another British scientist, the physician Robert McCarrison, also attempted to demonstrate the connections between modern food and physical and social degeneration in a series of experiments. McCarrison fed one group of rats on a whole-grain diet and a second group on a diet modeled on the food consumption practices of the British working class.³ While the first group of rats formed a relatively peaceful society, members of the second group became sick, aggressive, and one third of the way through the experiment, began to kill and eat one another. Although McCarrison acknowledged that “the observations made in rats are not necessarily applicable to human beings,” the example could not have failed to make a powerful point, especially as it was delivered in a lecture in the midst of the Great Depression. A third innovator, the German-trained scientist and philosopher Rudolph Steiner shared these convictions about the relationship between farming, food and health and developed a theory of biodynamic agriculture that combined composting with a controversial theory of spirituality and cosmic forces (Conford, 2001, pp. 69-70).

Magazine publisher and health foods advocate Jerome Rodale helped bring these European ideas about agriculture to an audience in the United States. Rodale established contact with McCarrison, Howard, and Steiner’s disciple Ehrenfried

³ The latter diet “consisted of white bread, margarine, over-sweetened tea with a little milk (of which the rats consumed large quantities), boiled cabbage and boiled potato, tinned meat and tinned jam of the cheaper sorts” (McCarrison, 1953). See Mintz (1985) for an analysis of the development of the diet of the British working class in the 19th century.

Pfeiffer and, in 1940, he bought an experimental organic farm in Pennsylvania. In 1942, Rodale launched the magazine *Organic Farming and Gardening*. The magazine failed among its target market of commercial farmers and only began to make money with the rise of the ecological and back to the land movements of the 1970s. Rodale himself also gained sudden notoriety when a 1971 article in the *New York Times Magazine* celebrated him as the “guru of the organic food cult” (Belasco, 1989; Conford, 2001, p. 102).

Apart from issues of health, organic foods have served as a potent symbol for broader movements for social reform. The communalist back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 1970s launched a wave of interest in organic foods that has yet to subside.⁴ For these young activists, organic foods formed an “edible dynamic” that tied together ecological concerns, egalitarian personal relationships, and rejection of social injustices in modern society (Belasco, 1989). Commercial exchange between communalist or small-scale organic farms and urban food co-ops and health stores also began to create an infrastructure of food production and distribution that was separate from the mainstream food industry (Belasco, 1989). Ideas about organic agriculture gained a tenuous foothold in university research centers (particularly in California) and political institutions at this time, although these initiatives were usually opposed or simply ignored by the agricultural establishment (Gieryn, 1999, p. 333; Guthman, 2004a, pp. 14-18). Finally, concerns about environmental toxins and the consequences of population growth that were epitomized in Rachel Carson’s *Silent*

⁴ A number of scholars have written studies of the American commune movement and its consequences. Examples include Berger (2004), Kanter (1972; 1973), and most recently, Turner (2006).

Spring (1962), the 1972 Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth*, and the world's first Earth Day in 1970 linked organic agriculture to the growing ecology movement (Dryzek, 2005; Gottlieb, 1993).

Activists at the conservative end of the political spectrum have also embraced organic foods as a symbol of the “good” society. For these reformers, organic foods have represented a way to connect with God-given order that exists in the natural world but has been corrupted by modern, liberal society. In the most extreme case, a informal group of aristocratic counterrevolutionaries and fascist sympathizers in England known as Kinship in Husbandry used organic agriculture as a metaphor for “natural” hierarchies and national spirit during World War II (Reed, 2001, 2002). In the United States, a significant amount of discourse about organics has had a conservative Christian tinge. This is most evident in “agrarian populist” literature that celebrates small-scale land ownership, independent family farming, and limited state intervention in agricultural markets. Perhaps the most influential proponent of agrarianism, Wendell Berry, portrays such a system of agriculture as not only environmentally sound, but also celebrates the family farm as “the last bastion against cultural estrangement” (Guthman, 2004a, p. 11). A vision that combines ecological concerns with independence, self-sufficiency and conservative family values may also resonate more widely in right-wing American politics (Dreher, 2006).

Table 1.1: Growth in the United States organic foods market⁵

Year	Organic sales (\$millions)	Organic market growth	Market penetration of organic foods
1997	3, 549	N/A	0.81%
1998	4, 286	19.2%	0.94%
1999	5, 039	17.6%	1.06%
2000	6, 100	21.0%	1.22%
2001	7, 360	20.7%	1.41%
2002	8, 635	17.3%	1.63%
2003	10, 381	20.2%	1.94%
2004	11, 902	14.6%	2.19%
2005	13, 831	16.2%	2.48%
2006	16, 718	20.9%	2.80%

Thus, “organic” is a misleadingly simple label for a diverse cultural field. In an important sense, the USDA’s technical definition of organics is an artifact of market relationships (Guthman, 2004a). As I explain in Chapter 2, the impetus to create federal organic regulations stemmed from the success of goods labeled organic in the marketplace during the 1990s and 2000s (M. Ingram & Ingram, 2005). Figure 1.1

⁵ This table is based on data presented in the *Organic Trade Association’s 2007 Manufacturer Survey*. The Executive Summary of the survey is available online at <http://www.ota.com/pics/documents/2007ExecutiveSummary.pdf>. I accessed the data on April 19, 2008.

shows this market growth and the increasing size of the industry. As these statistics indicate, the organic industry grew at a rate of 17% to 21% between 1997 and 2003. Growth slowed slightly in 2004 and 2005, but the industry continued to increase in size at a more rapid rate than the conventional (non-organic) foods industry. In comparison to the double-digit growth of organic foods, the sales of conventional foods increased at an annual rate of only 3% to 5% over the same period. In 2005, organics were a \$13.8 billion industry, up from \$3.6 billion in 1997. Although organic foods account for less than 3% of foods sold in the United States, they are a “hot” area for investment.

Sociological studies of organic foods

Mennell, Murcott, and van Otterloo have argued that most sociologists dismiss the field of food ideologies and consumption practices as unworthy of serious inquiry (Mennell, Murcott, & Otterloo, 1992). However, sociologists of culture, agriculture, social movements and science have all engaged with the growing organic foods industry. This literature provides important context for my own work. The most comprehensive study of the organic industry to date is Julie Guthman’s *Agrarian Dreams*. Guthman’s book forms part of a “new” sociology of agriculture that focuses on the political economy of agricultural production (Buttel, 2001; Newby, 1983). Focusing on organic agriculture in California, Guthman draws on extensive survey and interview data to argue that, in spite of its oppositional discourses, “the organic

sector itself is ‘industrializing’ and ‘globalizing’ at a rapid pace” (Guthman, 2004a, p. 2). In other words, she finds that organic farmers have largely replicated the structures, growing and marketing practices, and strategies of labor management that characterize conventional (non-organic) production. Three factors have influenced the evolution of the industry. First, the ranks of organic farmers have swelled because of the decisions of many conventional growers to convert some or all of their land to organic production. Rather than buying into organic philosophies, most of the new arrivals have been “pulled” into organic production by consumer demand, “pushed” by growing competition from low-cost overseas conventional producers, and “turned” by increasingly strict laws that limit synthetic pesticides (pp. 23-41). While these opportunistic converts might be expected to bring mainstream practices into the organic industry, Guthman also argues that economic institutions that affect all farmers have contributed to “industrial” forms of organic production. The most important of these are land values, which on an open market reflect the “highest possible income” that could be derived from the land (in California, this would frequently result from commercial or residential development, not from agriculture) (p. 68). Continuously rising land values make it difficult for farmers, particularly renters, to engage in time-consuming and costly agroecological practices associated with organic farming. Finally, the political institutions that regulate the organic industry contribute to the convergence. These institutions have created a narrow, legalistic definition of organic farming that emphasizes the use of particular materials and practices rather than broader ecological processes and outcomes, and that

completely ignores issues of farm size and farmworker rights (pp. 110-140). These three factors have transformed organic agriculture to such an extent that organic farming practices no longer constitute a radical alternative to conventional agriculture (see also Buck, Getz, & Guthman, 1997; Guthman, 1998, 2004c).

While Guthman analyzes the organization of organic agriculture, other scholars have focused on food activism at the point of consumption. Goodman and Dupuis argue that the Marxist-inspired concern with social organization and resistance in the sphere of production has blinded scholars to the political significance of consumer activism (Buttel, 2000; Goodman & DuPuis, 2002). They suggest that a more balanced approach would consider relationships between producers and consumers and would analyze food as “an arena of contestation” where consumers and producers both exercise agency to allocate material and cultural resources among competing approaches to food production and distribution (p. 17). In an extension of this argument, DuPuis (2000) advocates understanding consumers as “reflexive” agents who construct strategies of action based on their evaluation of competing claims made by social movements, government authorities and food corporations. She illustrates this claim by examining consumer demand for hormone-free organic milk. She interprets consumers’ desire for organic milk as a refusal of the artificial hormones used in conventional milk production that is analogous to the collective refusal of polluting industries by community-based NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) campaigns. Specifically, NIMBY and NIMB (“not in my body”) actions share “forms of politics ... [including] (1) a contestation of knowledge 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” (Allen & Kovach, 2000; DuPuis, 2000, pp. 289-290).

Scholars of social movements have also examined the campaigns of consumers and activists to shape corporate behavior and political institutions. For example, several studies have examined how markets for environmentally and socially responsible products, such as sustainably-produced lumber and Fair Trade coffee, arise from the interaction of social movements, consumers and corporations (Bartley, 2003, 2007; Levi & Linton, 2003). In the case of organics, Ingram and Ingram argue that pioneering producers “received tremendous support and affirmation in the marketplace ... [and] the legitimacy they gained through this process gave them a foothold in an unfriendly federal agricultural establishment ... enabling them to push for a different kind of construction of the food system from that prevailing in mainstream agriculture” (M. Ingram & Ingram, 2005, p. 123). Conversely, other scholars have shown that consumer activism can destroy budding markets. In one paper, Schurman (2004) analyzes the success of consumer and environmental groups (including organic foods advocates) in closing the European market to genetically modified foods. She argues that activists were able to exploit flaws in the biotech producer Monsanto’s public relations strategy to portray the company as arrogant and unconcerned with potential threats to consumers. In addition, the highly competitive European grocery industry took these consumer complaints very seriously and found it

less costly to reject biotech products than to risk a consumer backlash. The “unequal relations of dependency” between Monsanto, which relied on retailers to market its products, and retailers, which “could easily survive without selling GM foods” aided the campaigns to close markets to biotech products (p. 259). Finally, researchers have noted that the relationship between corporate and social movement actors generates conflict within the organic industry itself (Hess, 2004).

Cultural sociologists and anthropologists have engaged with this work by arguing that it is important not to exaggerate the distinction between capitalist market actors and consumer-based social movements. A number of these scholars have shown that tastes for gourmet foods, which include ones produced organically, contribute to cultural hierarchies that reflect inequalities of resources and power (Bourdieu, 1984; Ferguson, 1998; Roseberry, 1996). Drawing on this line of thought, Guthman has argued that the popularity of organic foods among consumers may reproduce the inequalities of the agricultural industry that it claims to criticize (2003). In gentrified Berkeley of the 1980s, organic food (represented by the organic baby salad greens known as “yuppie chow”) enabled affluent consumers to perform an “elite sensibility” that combined concerns about taste and body image with a commitment to creative food preparation and popular environmental issues (p. 52). Organic foods, with their connotations of careful husbandry, artisan preparation, and supposed deep connection with the natural world also fit quite closely with the frames of authenticity and exoticism that Johnston and Baumann (2007) argue define cultural sophistication in pluralist American society. In addition, organic foods arguably represent an

eviscerated form of politics because they “allow civil protest and public choice to be conflated with consumption choice and profit making” and create an illusion of consumer power while excluding certain issues from the realm of discussion (Guthman, 2004b, p. 235; see also Lukes, 2004).

Research on the economic organization of the organic foods industry, on consumer activism and on the relationship between food consumption and inequality forms an important context and background for my research. My dissertation analyzes accounts and organizational arrangements that industry members have developed as they navigate in this complex arena. As such, it aims to contribute to research on the relationship between formal organizations and movements for social change and to a growing conversation between social movements researchers and organizational scholars.

Movements and organizations

In the 1970s, the work of Mayer Zald and his colleagues offered a provocative but short-lived attempt to begin a conversation between social movements and organizations scholars. In a seminal work, Zald and John McCarthy made explicit parallels between formal organizations and social movements, including the identification of “social movement industries” and a “social movements sector,” a focus on the need of social movement and non-social movement organizations to secure resources (often in competition with other, similar organizations), and a

tendency to “operate as though organizational survival were the primary goal” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p. 1226). This resource-mobilization paradigm helped set the stage for a synthesis of the two fields of research. A year later, Zald and Michael Berger offered an analogy between national communities and organizational “polities” to orient research towards “social movements or phenomena resembling them [that] occur in organizations” (Zald & Berger, 1978, p. 824). In this article, Zald and Berger illustrated several typical “social movement phenomena” that existed within centralized, hierarchical organizations and issued a call to organizations researchers to join with social movements scholars in creating an integrated framework for the study of mobilization processes in organizational and political contexts.

Although the resource-mobilization approach shaped a generation of social movements scholars, Zald and Berger’s appeal for studies of mobilization in organizational settings received little attention (Davis & Zald, 2005). Recent work has tried once again to synthesize social movements studies and organizations research, as displayed in a collection of papers published under the title *Social Movements and Organization Theory*, which appeared in 2005. The *SMOT* researchers connected their synthesis to new developments in the structure and practices of social movements and organizations themselves. One contribution argued that “organizations increasingly resemble episodic movements rather than ongoing bounded actors, and organizations and movements are changing their strategies and routines in response to similar social and technological changes” (Davis & Zald, 2005, p. 335). These factors are shaped by the growth of the service and knowledge sectors of the economy, new communications

technology, and the increasing political power of corporations and “almost force” the conversation between social movements and organizations scholars to occur (p. 335). Building on these ideas, Zald, Morrill and Rao noted that organizations display a range of responses to social movement demands, including enthusiastic compliance, active resistance, and symbolic compliance that suggests “concern with changing the organization consonant with movement demands” but results in “little change in the behavior of employees or in the implementation of policy directives” (Zald, Morrill, & Rao, 2005, p. 254). They suggested that the amount of pressure a movement can apply to an organization, combined with the organization’s capacity and commitment to enact the changes that the movement calls for, may explain this variation in responses.

A second theme that appeared in the *SMOT* contributions involved efforts to create a unified theoretical framework to understand the origins and development of both social movements and formal organizations. In an introductory essay, McAdam and Scott claimed that recent developments in social movements research and organization studies “suggest a pattern of complementary strengths and weaknesses” and that collaboration between the two sets of scholars would bring benefits to both fields (McAdam & Scott, 2005, p. 5). In particular, they argued that the tendency of organizations scholars to analyze the organizational field as “a system of actors, actions and relations” offers a much-needed corrective to “movement-centric” social movements research (p. 10). On the other hand, they challenged organizations researchers to embrace a “process framework” developed by social movements scholars and to pay more attention to the “structuration” of fields (p. 12). While

McAdam and Scott's synthetic framework emphasized commonality between social movements and organizations at the level of fields, Campbell, in a complementary essay, investigated fine-grained social mechanisms that occur in both settings (Campbell, 2005). He explained that interpretive mechanisms such as framing that social movements scholars have developed might expand researchers' understanding of innovation and change in organizations. Finally, a contribution by Clemens reasserted the potential contributions of a common framework but also cautioned that the core imagery of collective protest in the social movements literature and of market relationships in the organizations literature may hinder a synthetic framework from understanding how states create "deeply entrenched structures of formal power which set the terms upon which social movements encounter corporations or members of corporations behave like activists" (Clemens, 2005, p. 352).

As is frequently the case in social movements literature, *SMOT* offers the impression of stepping into the midst of a noisy debate. The speakers argue vigorously for their ideas, but it can be difficult for the reader to understand points of connection or how the frameworks might contribute to the understanding of a particular case. In addition, the energy of the debate deflects attention from noticing those who are absent or who may not have been invited to the event. Before moving on, it is important to discuss the contributions that *SMOT* has made to the work I present here and to identify several weaknesses in these efforts to synthesize social movements and organizations research that I hope to address. As McAdam and Scott suggested, I have adopted a field-level approach to studying the organic foods industry. Rather than

concentrate on one particular organization or set of organizations, I examine relationships between professionals and the impact of new ideas and institutions on their work. Drawing from Clemens, I offer the state, which now regulates the organic industry through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), an important place in my analysis. I have also found Campbell's emphasis on fine-grained mechanisms, such as framing, a useful way to understand how industry professionals come to terms with the ambiguities of the industry's recent development. Finally, my discussion provides empirical accounts of how members of the organic industry are responding to some of the broad social changes identified by Davis and Zald. As the *SMOT* researchers would recommend, then, I aim to create a detailed, empirical study of field-level change in the organic industry. However, in order to do so, I have found it necessary to refer to other literature about the organizations-social movements encounter to correct problems in *SMOT*.

The articles collected in *SMOT* share two important problems. First, many of the authors assumed that social movements and organizations are, in Clemens's words, "two kinds of stuff" (Clemens, 2005). In other words, they act as if meaningful and precise distinctions can be drawn between social movements and non-social movement organizations, even though the research models that they present emphasize convergence between the two phenomena. Davis and Zald's study of social movement impact on organizations offers one example. In order to create a parsimonious model of outcomes, Davis and Zald focus on the *external* pressure applied by movements and the *internal* dynamics of organizations. They admit that "to the extent that groups and

organizations external to the focal organization have significant control, power and authority over it, the ‘external’ units may be conceptualized as part of the polity,” but they argue that this additional level of complexity makes it more difficult to develop a theory of movement/organization interactions (Davis & Zald, 2005, p. 272). Davis and Zald’s approach also contradicts studies that show that it is difficult to clearly distinguish between social movement “outsiders” and organizational “insiders” in real-life campaigns (Binder, 2002; Katzenstein, 1998).

In this project, I did not find it helpful to think of the organic industry and the organic movement as “two kinds of stuff.” Two examples will illustrate this problem. First, the industry’s most public episode of contention occurred in 1997, when a grassroots campaign opposed the effort of the USDA to include genetic modification and irradiation in its list of approved organic production methods. The USDA received half a million public comments (mostly negative) about this issue (Jasanoff, 2005; Zavestoski, Shulman, & Schlosberg, 2006). However, a large portion of these comments were generated by retailers and other industry members. Several of the organic industry professionals that I interviewed also refused to clearly distinguish between the organic industry and the organic movement. One industry professional explained to me that she did not see organic as a social movement because people participated for diverse reasons and with differing levels of concern. When describing her own work in the organic industry, however, this professional compared herself to Rosa Parks, a symbol of activism in the United States, and explained, “I just know every day when I come to work I’m thinking, ok, I’m making my contribution, and

hopefully if enough of us see the importance of it, something will shift.”⁶ In other words, she saw her own work as a form of activism.

In addition to creating a problematic distinction between movement and non-movement organizations and actors, *SMOT* has very little to say about the symbolic, meaningful and discursive aspects of movement (and organizational) activities. This is the second area in which the text proved unhelpful in my research. To the extent that agreements about the nature of organic foods exist, they revolve around the idea that organic foods represent an alternative to mainstream methods of food production and distribution. However, what precisely is meant by “alternative” is the subject of a great deal of debate. This contention exists because industry members forge connections between notions of organic foods and broader goals, such as protecting independent farmers, converting the maximum number of acres to organic management, or transforming society’s relationship to nature. Therefore, an approach to this social field must be able to come to terms with the construction and impact of these meanings.

Cultural institutions and creative agency

In order to deal with the issues of boundaries, identities and the role of culture, I draw on neoinstitutional studies of organizations. Neoinstitutionalists argue that symbols, ideas and conventions in the social environment shape the form of

⁶ Interview, October 10, 2005.

organizations and the experiences of their members (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Fine, 1996; Jepperson, 2002; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This approach poses a challenge to researchers because of the abstract character of much of the literature. One frequently-cited definition by DiMaggio and Powell, who in turn reference anthropologist Mary Douglas, gives the flavor of the work:

The new institutionalism in organization theory and sociology comprises a rejection of rational-actor models, an interest in institutions as independent variables, a turn toward cognitive and cultural explanations, and an interest in properties of supra-individual units of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals' attributes or motives ... Sociologists and organization theorists restrict [institutions] to those conventions that, far from being mere conveniences, "take on a rulelike status in social thought and action" ... [but] sociologists find institutions everywhere, from handshakes to marriages to strategic-planning departments. (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, pp. 8-9)

DiMaggio and Powell define an institutional approach primarily in terms of what it is *not*, referencing rational actor approaches and individualistic explanations. They are much less precise when it comes to explaining what institutions *are*. One can parse the definition that institutions are supra-individual, cognitive and cultural rules that shape thought and action, but this is still quite vague. Indeed, when it comes to offering concrete examples, DiMaggio and Powell offer a list that encompasses everything from mundane social rituals to features of complex organizations.

One goal of my dissertation is to show that the neoinstitutionalist framework can lend insight into the negotiation of meanings and practices in particular empirical contexts, such as the organic foods industry (Fine, 1984). As I explain below, I define institutions more precisely as models of social organization. This definition of

institutions resembles the one used by a number of scholars in this field, particularly those who highlight contradictions between orders of meaning.

This concept of institutional contradictions has been developed by Friedland and Alford. They define institutions as “symbolic systems” or “logics” that simultaneously transcend and are reproduced by concrete practices and that impose a meaningful order on experience (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 243). Every practice therefore has both an instrumental and a ritual side. Take the practice of buying and selling commodities in a market. On an instrumental level, this activity enables members of society to achieve certain, concrete goals, such as increasing wealth or obtaining a useful object. However, it also contains a ritual element that reaffirms a particular understanding of how the world works and what sort of relationships exist between members of society.

According to Friedland and Alford, this picture of institutional reproduction is complicated by the fact that society’s major institutions frequently offer incommensurable and contradictory “logics” (Espeland & Stevens, 1998; Friedland & Alford, 1991). Markets, for example, provide a template for social relationships between autonomous agents that pursue their interests through free exchange. In contrast, the family (as an institution) offers a symbolic system that emphasizes particularistic relationships between kin and selfless devotion to partners and children. Generally, objects are not bought and sold within families nor are kinship relations

given much weight in market settings.⁷ Finally, Friedland and Alford note that these “institutional contradictions are the bases of the most important political conflicts in our society ... [and] some of the most important struggles between groups, organizations and classes are over the appropriate relationships between institutions and by which institutional logics different activities should be regulated and to which category of persons they apply” (p. 256). To return to the statement by Elizabeth Henderson that launched this chapter, the impact of these contradictions appear in her argument that organic farming should not be controlled by the logic of industrial efficiency that dominates the conventional foods industry, but should aim to create a revolutionary social movement.

Friedland and Alford’s framework is helpful for thinking about the relationship between social movement discourse and market settings in the organic industry. However, it also presents several problems. First, Friedland and Alford provide little detail about what symbolic logics look like in real life. While they explain that in a very general sense “the institutional logic of capitalism is accumulation and the commodification of human activity,” this statement is so abstract as to not be very helpful in understanding what actually goes on in really existing markets (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248). Second, Friedland and Alford’s discussion of conflict and agency is similarly vague. On one hand, they argue that actions have a ritual character that reproduce institutionalized symbolic systems. However, they also argue that

⁷ It is important here to distinguish between institutional logics and concrete practices. Of course, people in markets frequently offer “deals” to family and friends. Friedland and Alford’s point is that such activities seem illegitimate in market settings. A business owner would not be likely to publish two price lists: one for family members and another for everyone else.

agents act strategically and are adept at launching cultural challenges to institutional logics. While it may be true that change and resistance are as much a part of life in institutions as reproduction, Friedland and Alford offer little in the way of helping us conceptualize how and under what conditions these dynamics play out.

Efforts to correct these problems in institutionalist theory have focused squarely on the cultural politics that occurs at the intersection of contradictory institutional orders. One example from the field of organizational studies is the approach known as “inhabited institutions” (Binder, 2007; T. Hallett & M. J. Ventresca, 2006). The proponents of “inhabited institutions” view such logics as a “double construction: institutions provide the guidelines for social interactions (“construct interactions”), but institutions are also constituted and propelled forward by interactions that provide them with force and meaning” (T. Hallett & M. J. Ventresca, 2006, p. 229). The attention to interaction and the negotiation of order in this approach has led researchers to focus on how members of organizations creatively mobilize different institutional logics in practice, especially in social settings that lie on the boundaries between what Friedland and Alford referred to as different institutional orders (Fine, 1984). For example, Binder’s ethnography of a non-profit social services agency demonstrated that access to the professional logic of social work enabled certain departments to gain a degree of autonomy from federal funding requirements, while other departments that lacked access to this cultural logic conformed closely to the forms of bureaucratic organization favored by federal evaluators (Binder, 2007). Similarly, Hallett and Ventresca’s reinterpretation of a

classic workplace ethnography showed that manual workers and managers combined elements of traditional craft organization with new models of bureaucratic management promulgated by the company's central headquarters (T. Hallett & M. Ventresca, 2006; T. Hallett & M. J. Ventresca, 2006). In an ethnography of a neonatal intensive care unit, Heimer investigates the relationship between legal, medical and familial modes of decisionmaking and points out that the representatives of each institutional logic work to shape organizational routines to promote their points of view (Heimer, 1999).

Social movements scholars have also begun to examine the interaction of institutional logics with local contexts and processes. One example is the “multi-institutional politics” (MIP) approach proposed by Armstrong and Bernstein (2008). This perspective defines culture as simultaneously constitutive and instrumental, expressive and strategic. Armstrong and Bernstein argue that the mainstream approach to social movements research, which views culture solely through the lens of strategic framing, is narrow in two ways. First, it assumes that the most important social movements are those which challenge the state and that the tools developed to study these movements can be extended unproblematically to other forms of activism. Second, it views culture only as an instrumental strategy and not as cause of mobilization in the first place. As a solution, they propose that activism takes place in a pluralist institutional context where multiple sources of power, only one of which is the state, exercise different material and symbolic forms of control. Therefore, social movements that target institutions such as organized religion and the medical

profession would be expected to differ both in collective identities and in strategic frames from those that target the state. This is because different institutional settings define “transgressive” behavior in different ways and provide different symbolic repertoires of protest to challengers.

These more recent approaches supplement new institutionalist research by showing how organizational environments and symbolic contradictions influence social action in specific cases. By pursuing these questions in my research on the organic industry, I aim contribute to this literature by creating a detailed account of how institutional forces make a difference in existing organizations. My project also moves beyond most of the studies that I have described, which tend to be based on ethnographies of single organizations. In contrast, my study examines action in the context of specific organizations as well as the relationships between organizations and actors in the broader industry. Finally, my project connects the new institutionalist literature to studies of the culture of markets.

Empirical research about cultural politics in market settings

A growing empirical literature that draws on the notion of cultural politics to investigate how cultural ideas and models shape economic exchanges and market structures also provides a model for this dissertation (Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Spillman, 1999; Zelizer, 1988). A key insight of this work has been that concepts such as efficiency, rationality and value take shape through historically and culturally

specific processes (Dobbin, 1994). Thus, culture does not merely act as a check or impediment on free market forces, it also constitutes the symbolic and material frameworks of economic activity (Sewell Jr., 1992; Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990).

Laura Miller's study of independent and chain book retailers exemplifies this work. Miller is interested in understandings of the differences between organizational forms and orientations to bookselling. She defines the struggles between neighborhood independents and the larger, highly rationalized, and more efficient chain stores not only as an economic battle, but also as a cultural campaign to "win a moral judgment on the appropriate organizational form for booksellers and the appropriate conduct of booksellers and consumers alike" (Miller, 2006, p. 6). For Miller, the book industry constitutes an important arena for the contest between independent and chain models of retailing because industry members frequently believe that books represent "sacred" values of creativity, emotional authenticity, and intellectual achievement (p. 219). They are able to connect their private struggles in the marketplace to a broader public defense of culture against the supposed homogenizing tendencies of chain retailers. Thus, bookselling straddles a line between private business venture and provision of a public good and this cultural ambiguity has enabled independent booksellers to make claims on consumers as citizens, not only as self-interested, bargain-hunting market actors. Miller notes that these claims have generated sporadic episodes of resistance to chain stores and non-market support for independents through donations and fundraisers. However, they have mostly failed to institutionalize "political" models of retailer-consumer relationships that would provide a robust alternative to the notions

of rational, sovereign consumer behavior that are taken for granted in the American marketplace.

A second example of this approach to research is Kieran Healy's cross-national study of blood and organ procurement. Healy argues that in order to understand variations in rates of organ procurement, scholars must examine the "cultural contexts and organizational mechanisms" through which procurement takes place (Healy, 2006, p. 2). In most of the world, organizations responsible for procuring and maintaining stores of blood and organs have defined the exchange of these substances as a gift and, in fact, laws and social norms in most countries prohibit offering blood and organs for sale. Nevertheless, shortages and instability in the supply of blood and organs have led some to advocate for the creation of a market for human body parts. Healy's investigation focuses on the ways that blood and organic procurement organizations work to maintain the definition of exchange in these objects as a gift rather than a sale even while a variety of secondary markets and pragmatic arrangements make it increasingly possible to exchange money for human goods (see also Almeling, 2007).

My research on the organic foods industry builds on the empirical foundation created by these researchers. Like them, I am interested in how shared understandings – and contentious debates – develop around symbolically-rich objects, in this case organic foods. Like these writers, I find that the combination of relatively abstract symbolic codes and collective representations with more concrete organizations is a useful way to cast light on the important topic of cultural agency, or how social "actors mediate cultural codes in particular settings" (Smith, 1998, pp. 10-11). My

case also resembles their cases in certain ways. To a certain extent, the organic foods industry is a culture industry – witness the variety of newspaper and magazine articles, books, movies, and even rock concerts that deal with organic food and agriculture issues.⁸ As in book retailing, many of the industry’s members have strong opinions about which organizational forms are the most appropriate for producing and selling organic foods. Organic foods also carry connotations of vibrancy, health and purity and partake to an extent in the symbolic language of gift exchange, as do the blood and organ banks studied by Healy. During my research, for example, I found a recurring “gift image” in company promotional materials, newsletters, and in various media favorable to the organic industry. Although the specific features of the image differed across the examples that I uncovered, the general format stayed constant. Two cupped hands, often dirty from working in the soil or wearing well-used work gloves, present the viewer with an offering such as a handful of vegetables or grain or a newly sprouted plant. Although the face of the presenter rarely appears, the hands indicate a farmer and forge an “unalienable” connection between the giver, the gift, and the land that sustains them both (Carrier, 1991; Mauss, 1967). The picture also indicates reciprocity: by accepting the gift (i.e. by purchasing organic food), the viewer has the impression that she will contribute to the farmer’s livelihood and to the vitality of the organically-managed land.

⁸ Notable books and films include works by Pollan (Pollan, 2001, 2006b), Schlosser (Schlosser, 2001), Spurlock (Spurlock, 2004), Kingsolver (Kingsolver, Hopp, & Kingsolver, 2007), Waters (Waters, Curtan, Kerr, & Streiff, 2007), Singer and Mason (Singer & Mason, 2006) and many others. Coverage of the organic industry has appeared not only in general newspapers, but also in “alternative” magazines like *The Nation*. The annual Farm Aid concert brings together musicians such as Neil Young and John Mellancamp to perform in support of independent, frequently organic, farmers.

The organic foods industry also differs in important ways from the industries that other scholars have studied. In the first place, organic foods are probably easier to commodify than either books or human body parts. Organic foods lack the distinctiveness that accompanies a work of literature or art (Velthuis, 2005). From the shopper's perspective, one crown of organic broccoli is very similar to any other crown of organic broccoli, no matter who grew it or which farm it came from. In addition, the food and grocery industry is more concentrated and rationalized than the book industry, such that only a few enormous corporations control much of food processing and distribution in the United States (Lyson & Raymer, 2000; Schwartz & Lyson, 2007). This creates additional obstacles for members of the organic food industry who want to argue for smaller, independent organizations. As is not usually the case for blood and organs, commercial trade in organic foods is the explicit goal of most industry members, although they have different understandings of what this trade means. Physically, organic foods (and other foods) resemble blood and organs in their perishability and ability to transmit disease, and these characteristics have shaped organizations in the industry and regulations governing organic production and handling (Goodman & Redclift, 1991; Nestle, 2003). However, the care taken in the handling of food is obviously not at the same level as the care taken in transporting a human heart intended for transplant. These differences suggest that empirical investigation of cultural politics in the organic industry may complement, not duplicate, these other studies.

Analytical frame for the research

Before moving on, I will summarize the theoretical frame that I have created here. I have presented the organic foods industry as a way to learn about how people adapt to contradictory expectations and definitions of activity, which in this case involves the difference between working in a market setting and participating in a movement for social change. From the growing conversation between social movements and organizations researchers, as represented by *SMOT*, I have adopted a field-level approach that examines interactions between members of the organic industry, the conventional foods industry, and the regulatory apparatus of the state. I have also drawn on cultural institutionalism and on recent studies of inhabited institutions and multi-institutional politics to gain purchase on the creative cultural politics and the blurred boundaries between industry “insiders” and movement “outsiders” that characterizes the organic industry. This literature, in turn, has illuminated parallels between my work on the organic industry and recent studies of cultural politics in market settings.

In the remainder of this section, I will outline the analysis of the industry that the dissertation presents. First, I describe two competing cultural models of rationalized and humanistic organization that exist in the organic foods industry. In Friedland and Alford’s terms, these models would be understood as contradictory institutional logics. Next, I discuss the connection of these models with processes of organization and identity creation within the industry.

Rationalization and Humanism

My research investigates the influence of two contradictory models of organization in the industry. I call these models of rationalized and humanistic organization. These models consist of assumptions, convictions and taken-for-granted knowledge that members of the industry bring to bear on their work and exist in the realm of shared, public meanings that social scientists label culture (Geertz, 1973). Importantly, the two models contradict one another on several points. On one hand, professionals can conceptualize the organic industry as an efficient industry that serves a rationalized market. On the other hand, they may think of it as a field organized to create and maintain meaningful social relationships between consumers and producers, which often dissolve in market settings.

Figure 1.2 presents these models in formal terms. The model of rationalized organization assumes the existence of a competitive market environment and aims for success in the market through efficient operations. People in market settings tend to orient their activities towards the satisfaction of individual interest through competition, exchange and calculation of costs and benefits and away from personal relationships and emotional attachments, such as friendship. Efficiency and success are the result of concentrated authority, a specialized staff, and absence of personal ties that would stand in the way of market considerations. The rationalized model of organization is similar to the description of the modern, bureaucratic corporation

offered by Weber and others (Ritzer, 2004; Weber, 1978b). Weber explained that “the reason for this impersonality of the market ... its orientation to the commodity and only to that ... Its participants do not look toward the persons of each other but only toward the commodity; there are no obligations of brotherliness or reverence, and none of those spontaneous human relations that are sustained by personal unions. They all would just obstruct the free development of the bare market relationship” (Weber, 1978a, p. 636). A rationalized model of organization in the organic foods industry would view organic foods as a commodity to be produced and distributed as efficiently as possible as part of a broader, coordinated strategy aimed at market success.

The model of humanistic organization contrasts with the rationalized model on several points. First, the organization’s environment is seen as made up of meaningful social relationships and the organization’s goals are understood in terms of helping to develop and support these relationships. Humanistic organizations achieve these goals through decentralized organization and responsiveness to local communities, participatory decisionmaking structures, and a focus on the members of the organization rather than on commodities in the marketplace. In the United States, the model of humanistic organization that I describe spread through the work of ecological and countercultural activists in the 1960s and 1970s, who self-consciously sought to create alternatives to existing economic and political organizations (Breines, 1982; Polletta, 2002; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Winner, 1986). In the context of organic agriculture’s growth in the 1970s, many industry members saw a decentralized,

participatory and community-focused food production and distribution infrastructure to be inherent in the word “organic” (Belasco, 1989). In this view, organic foods were a medium for building and transforming social relationships, not objects that were bereft of social ties and traded in the marketplace.

Table 1.2: Rationalized and Humanistic Models of Organization

	Rationalized	Humanistic
Features of organizational context that are emphasized:	market environment	social environment
Logic of organization:	concentrated authority; specialized staff	decentralized organization; participatory structure
Overall goals of the organization:	seeks efficiency and market success	seeks development of members and community
Characterization of relationships between people:	impersonal relationships governed by individualistic motivations	cooperative relationships linked to shared social vision
Focus of attention:	focus on commodity	focus on people

What is the ontological status of these models of organization? I can construct the clearest answer to this question by explaining what these models are *not*. First, it is important to note that I do not treat these cultural models as if they were independent

variables that exert causal influence on action and organizational forms in the organic industry. The language of variables and influence would suggest that it is possible to measure the prevalence of these models in the organic industry and correlate them with other specific variables, such as management practices. Some scholars of the organic industry have taken this approach by comparing the attitudes of organic farmers to their methods of cultivation, but the results of this research are inconclusive. For example, a study of Danish organic farmers by Kaltoft found that farmers who strongly believed that they had an ethical responsibility to steward the natural environment were more likely to use diverse cropping and composting techniques than those with narrow conceptions of ethical responsibility (Kaltoft, 1999). However, research by Guthman in California suggests that the attitudes of growers towards environmental responsibility are multidimensional and difficult to classify. A grower may articulate a strong sense of environmental responsibility, but a narrow conception of social responsibility related to issues such as farm labor and rural communities. Guthman also argues that factors such as farm size, career history, and market conditions mediate between the attitudes of growers and the farm management practices they employ (Guthman, 2004a). In a more expansive critique of social science surveys, Fantasia explains that the theoretical foundation of attitudinal research is the assumption that it is possible to abstract stable inclinations from the complex social relationships, institutional arrangements and interactions of everyday life. As a result, surveys of attitudes overlook the tendency of people to hold contradictory lines of thought and to synthesize these contradictions in particular, highly charged, social situations

(Fantasia, 1988). I would also add that focusing on individual attitudes discounts the shared, public nature of cultural models. For these reasons, I find that thinking of the models of organization in terms of attitudinal variables is not helpful for understanding the sort of cultural activity that I investigate in this dissertation.

I also reject the definition of these cultural models as ideologies. Social scientists use the concept of ideology to describe coherent world-views that are held by members of particular groups (Mannheim, 1985; Smelser, 1963). For example, scholars have discussed socialist movements as examples of groups that created a clear ideology to identify causes of class inequality and to articulate strategies of resistance and an alternative future (Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield, 1994). For these scholars, ideologies are coherent bundles of ideas that hang together and that members of groups adopt wholeheartedly. Although this connection between ideology and group activity addresses some of the problems of attitudinal research, recent research in the sociology of culture has argued that people respond to culture in a more fragmented and unpredictable fashion than the concept of ideology suggests. DiMaggio points to evidence from cognitive psychology that indicates that individuals “experience culture as disparate bits of information” and do not prioritize logical consistency in their use of culture (DiMaggio, 1997, p. 263). Similarly, Swidler’s well-known metaphor of culture as a “tool kit” suggests that people frequently hold contradictory cultural accounts and draw on culture eclectically to respond to problems posed by particular institutions and social situations (Bourdieu, 1977; Swidler, 1986, 2001).

If the models of rationalized and humanistic organization that I have described are neither bundles of attitudes nor ideologies, what are they? More importantly, what is the justification for referring to them as “models,” which implies that coherence and co-appearance exists among the various elements that I have identified? This question is important, Swidler points out, because social scientists have often assumed that cultures have internally coherent logics, but have then been puzzled when they find that this putative coherence makes little difference in how “ordinary” people use culture. In everyday activity, peoples’ ability to draw from different strands of culture without too much concern for coherence constitutes a strategic resource. Swidler explains:

It is important to note that while cultural contradictions, confusions and inconsistencies may worry researchers, they do not seem to bother ordinary people in the course of their everyday lives. Indeed, as I have argued, people are better equipped for life if they have available multiple approaches to situations, if they can shift justifications for their actions, and if they can mobilize different meanings to organize different lines of action ... In this sense, what appears as cultural incoherence is also adaptability, flexibility, keeping options open. (Swidler, 2001, pp. 182-183)

Questions of cultural coherence and logic are not unimportant, she continues, but answers to these questions must be anchored in careful analysis of how people use culture as part of their existence as social beings. In Swidler’s view, cultures, such as the models of romantic and prosaic love that she unearths in her interviews with middle-class Americans, have meaning and coherence because they are anchored by assumptions about social relationships and by real problems posed by institutions. As these assumptions and institutions change, people easily switch to new cultural tools.

Certain aspects of Swidler's model are problematic, such as the unacknowledged functionalism that inheres in her description of culture as a means of adaptation to institutional conditions.⁹ However, her argument that cultural analysis must be anchored ground analysis provides a foundation for the approach that I take in this dissertation. The models of rationalized and humanistic organization that I have presented are my own construction, but they are based on a grounded analysis of the discourse and activities of members of the organic industry. Members of the industry do not identify themselves as "rationalizers" or "humanists". However, elements of these two models of organization appear in the discourse of industry members and in the structures and routines of the organizations that they work for. Moreover, the elements of these models appear to hang together in the speech and action of industry members, so that they connect discussions of competitive market environments with hierarchical organization and impersonal relationships, for example. However, industry members generally did not express absolute adherence to one or another of the models. Instead, my argument is that members of the industry mobilize these models as parts of a cultural "toolkit" when they engage in debates about the industry's future and when they design and run organizations (Swidler, 1986, 2001).

⁹ For example, Blair-Loy argues that Swidler's culture meanings of love persist *despite* changes in institutions such as marriage (Blair-Loy, 2003, pp. 187-191). Also, Armstrong and Bernstein point out that people mobilize culture in efforts to challenge and change institutions, not simply to adapt to them (Armstrong & Bernstein, forthcoming). These claims challenge Swidler's model of culture as a means of adaptation.

Looking ahead

The next four chapters of the dissertation analyze the influence of these two cultural models on organization and discourse in the organic industry. In Chapters 2 and 3, I examine mainstream grocery stores that have begun to carry organic foods, natural foods co-op stores that developed from social activism in the 1960s and 1970s, and newly-created regulatory institutions that increasingly structure the field. My goals are to show that rationalized and humanistic principles appear in all of these organizational settings but also to demonstrate that the distinctive histories and situations of these different organizations lead them to respond to models of organization in different ways. At one extreme, the mainstream supermarkets that have begun to carry organic foods are finding that features of the organic industry and of organic products themselves stand in the way of rationalized systems of distribution. Perhaps even more significantly, organic foods are connected with broader changes in the grocery market that have begun to call into question the legitimacy of purely rationalized models of organization. At the opposite extreme, natural and organic foods co-ops, which developed from efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to create an infrastructure of humanistic organizations in the United States, are facing increasing market pressures from their highly rationalized supermarket competitors. As institutionalist theory would predict, the members of co-ops are redesigning their organizations to conform to models of market rationalization, but they also have sought ways to connect these new developments to a collective identity of humanistic

organization. Finally, the regulatory institutions that shape the organic industry play an important role in promulgating the logic of market rationalization, but they also include features of humanistic participation that contribute to rules that sometimes seem irrational from a pure market standpoint.

Chapter 4 examines how these different logics and organizational contexts influence what C. Wright Mills called the situated “vocabularies of motive” of professionals within the organic industry (Mills, 1940). Mills studied motives not as a reflection of the psychological states of particular actors, but as a social activity that people perform to define the nature of situations in the course of social interaction (see also Scott & Lyman, 1968). As we will see, the different models of organizations that exist in the organic industry and the different structural locations and organizational contexts that professionals occupy lead to variation in the motives that they present for their activities. In particular, a comparison of interviews that I conducted with industry members makes this variation evident. However, we will also see that in spite of this variation, many industry members define their work by reference to a larger project of environmental reform and improvement for the sake of the public good. The diverse cultural resources of the environmental movement enable members of the industry to define boundaries and to present specific organizational models as most able to meet the needs of the environment and the public (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). However, the notion of a shared project also enables industry members to bridge differences, form alliances, and compromise about each others’ presence in the market (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999; Fligstein, 2001).

My empirical discussion of vocabularies of motive, boundaries and compromise in the industry reinforces the importance of building flexibility into our understanding of “insiders” and “outsiders” in social movement and organizational contexts. In certain contexts, members of large, market-oriented organizations may define the members of more alternative, humanistically-oriented organizations as outsiders. Humanistically-inclined professionals may also define themselves and their organizations in these terms. However, agreements about the shared, environmentalist purpose of the organic industry can help professionals reach across these symbolic and organizational gaps and come to terms with each others. At the same time, this shared cultural framework leads nearly all professionals in the organic industry to define themselves as “outsiders” in relationship to the mainstream, purely market-oriented conventional foods industry.

Finally, Chapter 5 asks how professionals within the organic industry represent their motives and their organizations to the broader public and particularly to actual and potential consumers of organic foods. The concept of framing guides this discussion, which connects the mainstream social movements literature, which portrays framing as a strategic activity, and the institutionalist literature, which views framing as a cognitive, structuring mechanism. Specifically, I argue that professionals in the organic foods industry present organics to the public in a way that makes sense in terms of their own vocabularies of motive, but that also recognizes that consumers may not be as committed to environmentalist goals.

The concept of cognitive frames was introduced to the sociological literature by Erving Goffman, who defined frames as “schemata of interpretation” that people employ to organize experience, perceive events, and describe events to others (Goffman, 1974, pp. 21, 24). Goffman considered frames to be a central part of group culture and pointed out that people are likely “to be unaware of such organized features as the framework has and unable to describe the framework with any completeness if asked, yet these handicaps are no bar to easily and fully applying it” (p. 21). Thus, for Goffman, frames are ideas and models that are institutionalized at the cognitive, taken-for-granted level (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; DiMaggio, 1997). In this sense, the market-oriented and humanistic models of organizations should be understood as frames that structure the perceptions and discourse of members of the organic industry.

Mainstream social movements literature has used the concept of frames to show that meanings are often constructed in the course of protest events through the agency of social movement members. For example, Benford and Snow explain that activists use frames to diagnose problems that they perceive in society, to propose solutions to the problems, and to motivate members of social movements to act collectively to implement these solutions (Benford & Snow, 2000). The efficacy of social movement frames depends on the extent to which they “align” with the interpretive frames of potential movement members; through negotiations over meanings, activists and their constituents frequently arrive at a common frame (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). It is important to realize that this definition of

framing differs from Goffman's use of the term. The social movement literature portrays activists as involved in explicit discussion and manipulation of cognitive frames. For example, scholars have defined framing as "the conscious, strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996, p. 6).

These two ways of understanding framing can be combined to analyze how professionals in the organic foods industry interact with consumers. Many professionals believe that organic foods bring not only individual benefits for consumers, but also contribute to the good of society as a whole. Frequently, their vocabularies of motive portray consumption of organic foods as an ethical obligation that is connected with other projects of social reform. However, they are often convinced that most consumers of organic foods do not share these convictions. Rather than viewing consumption as a form of civic engagement, professionals believe that most consumers purchase organic foods mainly because they believe it will benefit them individually and members of their families. As they construct frames for organic foods, these professionals seek ways to connect these perceived motivations of consumers to a broader understanding of the public good.

Research Design and Methods¹⁰

This dissertation is based on qualitative data that I collected between 2005 and 2007. First, I conducted 40 open-ended, semi-structured interviews with professionals in the organic foods industry and with other members of this organizational field, such as activists, researchers and business consultants. I supplemented the interview data with analysis of articles in the popular press and trade journals and of material produced by corporations and trade associations. Finally, I collected participant observation data from regular meetings at an organic foods co-operative retail store in San Diego and from annual trade conferences that brought together professionals throughout the industry in San Diego and Anaheim, California. Collecting data from these different sources increased the richness and breadth of the information available for analysis and also allowed me to triangulate between different sorts of data to check validity (Lofland, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). For example, I compared descriptions of events that respondents recalled during interviews with written accounts of the same events that I found in trade journal archives.

Using a “grounded theory approach to data analysis, I identified recurring themes and topics in my interview, archival and observational data (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). These themes emerged from the data in the sense that they frequently arose in different sources. Beginning with statements from individual sources, I developed more abstract categories to clarify similarities across

¹⁰ A detailed description of data collection and analysis and a discussion of research challenges appears in the Appendix.

the data. I also worked down from concepts suggested by the sociological literature to construct an analysis of the data. In my coding and analysis of the data, I used the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. I am confident that this approach captured the themes and ideas that figure centrally in the culture and organization of the organic foods industry.

CHAPTER 2:
CARGILL AND GOJI BERRIES:
UNEVEN RATIONALIZATION IN THE ORGANIC INDUSTRY

Does Mickey Mouse eat organic? I asked myself this question as I walked out of the Convention Center in Anaheim, California and noticed an enormous silhouette of the animated character's face looming over the boundaries of the nearby Disneyland theme park. I was in Anaheim in the spring of 2005 to attend the annual Natural Products Expo West, an annual industry-wide gathering of companies and professionals in the natural and organic products industry. During its four-day run, the Expo drew thousands of retailers, suppliers, producers and media representatives to display new products and to attend a variety of seminars ranging from technical ("The Expanding Role of Inositol and Cal-Mag IP-6 in Human Health") to thought-provoking ("Crossroads: Organic, Local and Other Food Trends for Today's Conscious Eater") to simply odd ("Irritable Bowel Syndrome – Not What You Think" and "Stump the Herbalist!"). The highlight of the Expo, however, was the trade show, an enormous show-and-tell and networking event for industry members. My fieldnotes captured some of the energy and confusion of this social scene:

I entered the Expo floor to an overwhelming scene of noise, light and excitement. The Expo floor covers the size of four football fields ... I entered the food section, intending to explore the organic food displays. This section went on and on. The carpeting for this section was all green (other sections were colored differently) – symbolic, perhaps? ... I talked to one person who raised goats for cheese in Montana and sampled some of his delicious spreadable chevre. He explained that he and his wife had been raising goats for six years and that they had recently won an award for a sustainable [farming]

operation ... A few aisles away I saw a booth for Hunt's canned organic tomatoes – sort of the opposite end of the spectrum since Hunt's is a huge and well-established food company! ... I met a nutritionist who had a booth where he was handing out and signing copies of his new book: "The Best Natural Foods on the Market Today: A Yuppie's Guide to Hippie Foods" ... It seemed to me that anxiety existed about the identity of the market ... the Expo floor gave me the sense that things were "mixed up" – booths displaying raw cacao seed and dried goji berries and advertising "Nature's First Law" (i.e. a real "hippie" operation) symbolically and physically shared the same market space with huge manufacturers and distributors like Hunt's and Cargill.¹¹

I had the sense that things in at the Expo and in the organic industry more broadly were mixed up because I observed a clash of symbols that connoted very different forms of social organization. On one hand, dried berries, goat farmers, and appeals to the laws of nature suggested an informal, creative and humanistic sort of organization that cared little for conventional notions of success in markets. On the other hand, brands such as Hunt's and Cargill brought visions of hierarchical order, profit calculation and relentless pursuit of market advantage to mind. I found it difficult to bridge the cultural gaps between these two orders of meaning and organization.

My intuition about the "mixed up" nature of the industry proved correct. In quantitative terms, the industry has grown rapidly in the past decade. Along with this growth in sales and in the value of companies has come a restructuring of the organizations in the industry and changes in the quality of the relationships of its members. These changes include the purchase of organic brands by mainstream food companies, the wider distribution of organic products in regular supermarkets, the

¹¹ Fieldnotes, March 18, 2005.

standardization of meanings and practices of organic production, and direct market competition between very different sorts of organizations. These developments have raised questions for some members of the industry about whether organic companies are sacrificing the qualities that make them unique in order to grow. From the perspective of critics, a whimsical juxtaposition of Disneyworld and the organic industry takes on sinister overtones: *Will Mickey Mouse (as a symbol of mainstream corporate America) eat the countercultural organic industry?*

In this chapter, I use models of rationalized organization developed by Max Weber and George Ritzer to interpret these recent developments in the organic industry. In light of these models, the organic foods industry presents a unique phenomenon, which I call uneven rationalization. This means that rationalized structures and practices exist alongside and in tension with structures and practices that oppose rationalization. In the first section, I use Ritzer's work to define the sort of rationalized organization I am talking about. I also describe economic and cultural pressures that organic foods industry members face to rationalize as their industry grows larger, more complicated and more embedded in the organizations and networks of the mainstream food industry.

In the later sections of the chapter, I examine two cases of change in the organic industry in more detail. First, I examine rationalization on a political level through the National Organic Program (NOP). I argue that the NOP has created a regulatory framework that facilitates rationalization in the organic industry (with a few exceptions). In addition, the NOP has brought many of the debates about the future of

the organic industry into the arena of institutionalized politics. Second, I focus on the efforts of large food companies, primarily retailers, to rationalize the distribution and marketing of organics. In this area, I contend, uncertainties related to the characteristics of the organic industry and organic products, structural changes in the broader grocery industry, and the campaigns of consumer activists have impeded rationalization. I conclude with a brief discussion of the future of uneven rationalization in the organic industry, drawing on Weber to point out problematic assumptions in Ritzer's model.

Rationalization, organics, and the food industry

In his popular book *The McDonaldization of Society*, George Ritzer offered a definition of rationalized organization that contains four key components. The first two components are efficiency and calculability. For Ritzer, rationalized organizations streamline the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services as much as technically possible. They also view and present these goods and services in quantitative terms, such as by stressing their value in terms of the amount of the good or service offered for the price. Such quantitative framing facilitates comparisons between products and enables rationalized organizations to measure efficiency. Alongside the principles of efficiency and calculability, Ritzer argued that rationalized organizations create predictable experiences and interactions and use technology to control the inherent unpredictability of people and natural settings. For example, he

noted that rationalized organizations have quality standards for goods and services, as well as standards for organizational design and operations, and use technology and forms managerial surveillance to control the actions of workers and the appearance of products according to these standards. Ritzer's account of rationalized organizations, particularly his emphasis on the calculability of decisions, is closely related to Max Weber's discussion of formal rationality in economic and organizational settings (Ritzer, 2004, p. 23; Weber, 1978a).

Ritzer took McDonald's chain of restaurants as the model of a hyper-rationalized organization. However, the features of rationalization that he identified are common throughout the mainstream food industry. The provision of food is a complex project. It involves the development of production methods intended to guarantee crop yields that are both substantial and stable, in spite of the risk of adverse weather or other disasters that may affect agriculture. Food production also requires that growers and processors minimize the possibility of contamination by toxic substances or bacteria, a task that becomes more complicated as operations grow in size and intensity (Nestle, 2003). Once food leaves the farm or factory, coordinated distribution systems are needed to move it to various points of consumption, including retail stores, restaurants, and schools and other public institutions. These distribution systems need to deal both with the perishability of many of the products that they transport and with the uncertainties of production – if a freeze decimates the citrus crop in California, distributors need to be able to locate alternative sources of supply. Finally, on the retail level, stores need to manage thousands of products and brands.

The fact that all of these activities take place in an extremely competitive market heightens the importance of efficiency, predictability, calculation and control within the food industry (Goodman & Redclift, 1991; Marsden, Flynn, & Harrison, 2000; Nestle, 2002).

The food industry also displays what Ritzer calls the “irrationality of rationalization,” or the tendency of rationalized organizations and systems to produce consequences that run counter to widespread ideas about human dignity and the best interests of society (Ritzer, 2004, p. 16). For example, economic and political leaders in the United States frequently speak of the importance of small businesses and entrepreneurship (Ingram & Rao, 2004; Miller, 2006). However, food and grocery companies rank among the largest companies in one of the most concentrated industries (Lyson & Raymer, 2000; Schwartz & Lyson, 2007). Well-known food producers such as Coca-Cola and Procter & Gamble rank among the largest one hundred companies worldwide. Within the United States, products from the three largest food companies (Philip Morris, ConAgra, and RJR-Nabisco) account for almost 20% of food sales (Nestle, 2002, p. 13). In the retail sector, a similar pattern of concentration exists. One 1999 estimate indicated that the five largest grocery companies accounted for a third of the sales in the United States (*Slotting: Fair for small businesses and consumers?*, 1999, p. 75). The costs of doing business on a national level also puts great pressure on smaller food and grocery companies to merge with the conglomerates.

Consolidation and other “irrationalities” result from efficiency of the food industry, which “provides a daily average of 3,800 calories per capita ... nearly twice the amount needed to meet the energy requirements of most women, one-third more than that needed by most men, and much higher than that needed by babies, young children and the sedentary elderly” (Nestle, 2002, p. 13). This oversupply of products leads companies to compete through advertising and fees paid to retailers for prominent product placement in stores. Smaller companies with limited budgets are at a clear disadvantage when it comes to these costs (*Slotting fees: Are family farmers battling to stay on the farm and in the grocery store?*, 2000; *Slotting: Fair for small businesses and consumers?*, 1999). Indeed, many industry members that I spoke to explained that the greatest challenge that small companies faced was simply to get their product into a retail store. In addition, the efficiency of the food industry may also contribute to overweight, obesity, and chronic diseases such as diabetes in American society (Nestle, 2002; Pollan, 2006b).

Many leaders of organic companies and consumers of organic foods believe that the organic industry offers an alternative to the rationalization that exists in the food industry – or at least that it *should* offer this alternative. Although a certain number of growth-oriented companies existed even in the early years of the industry, the organic industry also relied on alternative networks of distribution and retailing (Belasco, 1989). In addition, these alternative networks were seen by many industry members as representative of an anti-rationalized vision of food production. In spite of the organic industry’s oppositional identity vis-à-vis the mainstream food industry,

though, industry members have experienced economic and cultural pressures to rationalize their operations as a result of the last decade of market growth.

On the economic side, several factors contribute to rationalization. First, as the industry grows in size, the challenges of production and distribution that its members face become more complicated. Developing standard rules and procedures helps resolve these complications and enables members of the industry to pursue business without interruptions (Ritzer, 2004, p. 23; Weber, 1978b, p. 956). The growth of the industry has also brought it into closer contact with the conventional foods industry and companies within the organic industry have adopted rationalized procedures and techniques from their conventional peers. This is especially the case for those companies that have been purchased by conventional food conglomerates, which is an increasing phenomenon in the organic industry. In 2000, for example, Jesse Singerman, a longtime natural foods co-op leader, pointed out the significance of this trend:

Initially many of the mergers and acquisitions of natural products companies represented a roll-up strategy by other natural products companies to increase their size, buy up good operators, and position the larger company for market dominance or to go public ... However, the latest round of acquisitions on the manufacturing side seems to be a precursor of something really new – the acquisition of natural products companies by mainstream food companies. This new round of acquisitions is not just creating larger competitors within our industry, although that is happening, but more importantly represents the potential absorption of natural foods into conventional food channels and distribution systems ... That situation, and others like it, will certainly present some challenges we haven't encountered yet. (Singerman, 2000)

Scholars that have studied the development of the organic industry agree that such consolidation is widespread and influential in the industry.¹²

Members of the organic industry also experience pressures because of the cultural significance of rationalized practices and procedures. Members of the organic industry have adopted rationalized structures in order to gain support and legitimacy as a growing industry in the American economy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For example, venture capitalist funders are an important source of support for companies and favor those organizations which display rational forms of organization. Similarly, industry members who are looking to position their companies for sale to mainstream food corporations have more success if they are able to demonstrate compatibility between their organizations and potential buyers. Members of the industry are also concerned with media representations of their activities. Historically, the news media has treated organic food as a comic diversion, at best, as at times even as a potential health risk. Demonstrating rational organization and grounding in science has helped the industry win positive coverage in the press, although industry members remain on guard against potential negative coverage that would undermine the industry's growth. Finally, industry members seek legitimacy in the eyes of policy makers and government regulators.

This chapter argues that rationalization, as defined by Ritzer and by Weber's account of formal rationality, has influenced the organic industry in significant ways.

¹² In spite of a search of the food studies literature, I have not been able to locate recently-published studies of the consolidation of the organic industry (for dated studies, see Allen & Kovach, 2000; Buck et al., 1997). However, unpublished data from scholarly research is available on the internet. For example, see <http://www.msu.edu/~howardp/organicindustry.html>.

However, I also make the case that rationalization in the industry is uneven and that in some important ways, organic foods fail to conform to the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. In the next section of the chapter, I develop the first part of this argument by examining the federal regulatory framework that has defined organic foods since 2002. I show that this framework creates a foundation for each of Ritzer's four principles of rationalization (with a few exceptions). Next, I turn to grocery retail sector as an important site of the encounter between mainstream and organic foods.¹³ I show that mainstream supermarkets have attempted to fit organic foods into existing, rationalized structures and practices. I also demonstrate that features of organic foods, of the current grocery industry, and of consumer activists cause organic foods to partially resist such rationalization. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on the future of rationalization in the organic industry.

The organic standards and industry governance

A great deal can change in thirty years, and the relationship between the organic industry and the national political institutions that regulate food production offers one example. In 1971, Earl Butz, a farmer and agricultural economist appointed as Secretary of Agriculture by Richard Nixon earned the enmity of organic farmers and their supporters by quipping, "We can go back to organic agriculture in this

¹³ Of course, a comprehensive investigation of rationalization in the organic industry would need to examine the production and processing of organics, as well as retailing. But that is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

country if we must; we know how to do it. However, before we move in that direction, someone must decide which 50 million of our people will starve” (*Nation’s Agriculture* 1971; qtd. Guthman, 2004, p. 110). Butz was a staunch advocate of intensive cultivation of commodity crops for the national and international market, the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers to increase crop yield, and the consolidation of farming and ranching operations to achieve economies of scale and to drive down food prices available on the market. Although he hardly viewed the tiny and disorganized organic industry of the day as a serious threat to these priorities, he equated organic agriculture with a step backwards and with an irresponsible rejection of the needs of the nation.

In 2002, just over thirty years after Butz’s pronouncement, the USDA launched its National Organic Program (NOP) after a lengthy and somewhat contentious period of development. This program represented a significant victory for the organic industry because it indicated acceptance by the most powerful agricultural agency in the country.¹⁴ It also gave regulatory clout to the use of the word “organic” in the marketing of food products. First, the program provided a clear and legally enforced definition of organic agriculture and guidelines for the processing of organic products. It also made explicit connections between organic farming and the environmentalist goal of sustainable agriculture, although it stopped short of claiming that organic foods

¹⁴ Guthman (2004a) disagrees, claiming that for committed members of the organic movement, “the federal law represented a huge symbolic loss. It effectively asked agencies that had been most hostile to organic farming to confer it legitimacy and it forced organic farmers to do business with the very agricultural establishment that they set out to oppose” (116). This chapter examines some of the criticism of the federal law and the NOP; however, my overall approach differs from Guthman’s in that I seek to challenge the assumption of a sharp distinction between the organic “movement” and the organic “industry”.

were demonstrably better for consumers or for the environment. Second, the NOP created a network of USDA-accredited organic certification agencies and authorized significant fines for companies found to be making fraudulent organic claims about their products. The NOP, then, granted a degree of stability and institutional legitimacy to the rapidly growing but somewhat unstable organic industry.

The NOP also contributed to the rationalization of the organic industry in several ways. First, it created a single definition of organic foods and a single source of decisionmaking and authority concerning organic regulations. This concentration and standardization replaced a patchwork of organic definitions and informal arrangements that existed before 2002 and increased the efficiency of transactions in the industry. Second, the NOP institutionalized a highly technical and “narrow” definition of organic based on formal rules and lists of allowed materials (Guthman, 2004a). This facilitates calculation, which in turn enables the participation of large, rationalized companies in the industry. Third, the NOP privileges formal representation and scientific expertise in decisionmaking processes, which increases the predictability of the organic rules. Fourth, the NOP has created a framework that also channels its critics to protest in institutionalized ways.

A single definition creates efficiency

From the beginning of the organic industry’s growth, organic farmers, retailers and consumers faced a significant problem. How could they be sure that products

marketed as organic had actually been produced without the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers? This was a problem because organic processes of production left only a few marks on finished products that were easily visible to consumers. Some organic consumers used the presence of insects on leafy greens, like lettuce, as a way to gauge organic methods – live bugs meant that the product was actually organic, while dead bugs indicated the presence of pesticide sprays (Belasco, 1989). Organic fruits and vegetables could also sometimes be distinguished by physical qualities, such as smaller size or irregular shape. Commenting on changes in these characteristics in organic produce available on the market today, one longtime organic farmer and consumer remarked,

When I go in Whole Foods, and everything is just beautiful, I wonder if it's organically grown. Because when I pick my broccoli, it's got some critters that have been eating it ... At Whole Foods, everything is just beautiful and I have my doubts.¹⁵

Ironically, this farmer and consumer found that increased similarity between the cosmetic appearance of organic and conventional foods weakened his confidence in the quality of the products. This perspective may have been characteristic of organic consumers in the early years of industry growth, but it is increasingly rare today.

A third guarantee of the organic integrity of products during the early years of the industry was the knowledge and reliability of retailers that sold them. Some retailers acted as gatekeepers by sorting out dependable organic farmers and produce from fraudulent ones. For example, one independent retailer, who began to work in the

¹⁵ Interview, June 21, 2005.

industry in the early 1970s and founded a small chain of stores in the early 1980s, recounted:

I opened in July [of 1983] and there was a short supply of a lot of items. I had been involved in organics for ten years and I pretty much knew all the suppliers in the area. One of the top five products in organic was carrots, and I didn't have any organic carrots. There was a couple of other small stores in the area that had them and I had customers coming in and saying, you know, these other people have them and why don't you have them? It was really hard to not carry them because they were a product and they had the label on it. I knew that the people said they were organic but, I can't remember the brand name or whatever, but I had strong concerns. So I heard that they weren't organic. So I said, you know what, I can't confirm that they are organic and I don't want to carry something that I am not one hundred percent sure about it being organic. And whereas I might have lost sales initially I perhaps won over customers with the integrity of hey, we're going to treat you fairly and honestly.¹⁶

This retailer explains that when he launched his business, he faced several competitors that he believed were fraudulently marketing organic carrots. He explains that because of his lengthy experience in the organic and his knowledge of local suppliers, he was aware that the carrots might not actually be organic, and he made a decision not to sell them. In this, he acted as an informal industry gatekeeper by determining which (putatively) organic products were available for consumers to buy. However, he also notes that his decision disappointed many of his consumers, at least initially. Essentially, he staked his credibility and reputation against organic marketing claims that he believed were false. As he points out, this “was really hard” – it was a risky gamble for a new business in a competitive market.

¹⁶ Interview, October 26, 2005.

Overall, these strategies to ensure the integrity of organic products restricted the size of the consumer market for organic products. Most likely, few consumers felt comfortable checking (or eating) the insect population on their lettuce or paying a premium to buy smaller or irregularly shaped products. Locating a trustworthy retailer also required an investment of time and energy on the part of consumers. In addition, retailers generally had a short-term disincentive to check the background of each product that they sold. As the retailer quoted above explained, it was far easier to make customers happy by selling products with the organic label and holding the grower responsible for the integrity of the claim than it was to investigate each product and explain shortages to shoppers.

Organic certification programs developed in the 1970s and 1980s to provide third-party evaluation of organic production claims.¹⁷ The first certification programs were designed and administered by private organizations and trade groups. J.I. Rodale (discussed in Chapter 1) and his organization developed the first set of guidelines and offered an organic seal of approval to growers whose practices conformed to them, which was meant to serve as the customer's guarantee that the product was actually organic. These guidelines served as a model for California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), a group of countercultural organic growers that formed in 1973 to discuss organic practices and to resolve these marketing dilemmas. Organizations like CCOF developed in other states, such as Oregon Tilth, and each group developed a private

¹⁷ In a series of important articles and in a book, Guthman analyzes the history and politics of organic certification in California (Buck et al., 1997; Guthman, 1998, 2004a). My review of this history of certification programs draws mainly from her work (particularly Guthman, 2004a, pp. 110-141).

set of standards and a certification program. Although these programs exchanged information with one another, they operated independently. Other members of the organic industry pushed for the codification of organic agriculture at the level of state law, such as the California Organic Foods Act, which was passed in 1979, revised in 1982 and strengthened in 1990 in the wake of food contamination scares and growing demand for organic products.

These laws and certification programs offered additional guarantees to consumers. No longer did they have to trust the claim of growers and retailers that their food had been produced with the techniques of organic agriculture; they were now able to look for marketing symbols that indicated conformity to an established set of rules and third-party inspections. However, the *diversity* of laws, programs and symbols began to create obstacles to the growing trade in organic products. In particular, the lack of a common certification framework created barriers to trade in organic products across state lines. In addition, private programs could not prevent uncertified growers from marketing their products as organic (without using a seal or name of a certification organization) and some state legislatures refused to create penalties for such false claims.

In response to these marketing challenges, organic farmers, processors and retailers formed a national trade group, later called the Organic Trade Association, which began to push for federal legislation that would facilitate trade by creating a uniform definition of organic production and allowing penalties for false organic claims. This effort found a sponsor in Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont. On February

8, 1990, Senator Leahy introduced the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) in the U.S. Senate. Leahy explained:

Consumers are worried about potential hazards of the foods they eat. Instead of finding safer alternatives on supermarket shelves, they are finding a myriad of confusing and unsubstantiated claims such as “organically grown” and “natural” ... Currently, 22 States have different regulations for organic foods, which confuses the issue for many consumers. This bill sets one tough national standard. Only foods meeting this standard will be stamped with the “organically produced” label ... Supermarkets, able to trust the “organically produced” label, will be more willing to carry organic food, generating increased consumer demand, thus contributing to more profitable farming.¹⁸

Leahy clearly framed the bill in the interests of trade by emphasizing consumers’ right to be able to distinguish authentic from false claims, the increased availability of organic foods that would result from the removal of barriers to trade, and the likely profits of farmers and retailers (see also M. Ingram & Ingram, 2005). The legislation passed as part of the Farm Bill of 1990 and after a lengthy period of development and debate, the National Organic Program (NOP) was implemented in 2002. The final version of the NOP to required all accredited certification agencies to certify to one standard definition of organic production. In other words, the NOP used existing certification agencies, such as CCOF and Oregon Tilth, to inspect farming operations and grant organic certification. However, it did not allow agencies that had used more stringent definitions of organic before the NOP went into effect to impose additional requirements beyond those included in the NOP. This disappointed people who felt that the NOP did not codify all of the elements of organic farming (Guthman, 2004a, pp. 100-111).

¹⁸ Senator Leahy’s remarks were reproduced in the 1990 Congressional Record Index Online.

As a regulatory program, the NOP contributed to the rationalization of the organic industry along the lines established by Ritzer's model. In the first place, the NOP's single national definition of organic production made the organic industry more efficient by reducing what economists call transaction costs – the costs that industry members incur to locate the information that they need to make a market exchange (Williamson, 1975). As the earlier explanation offered by an independent store owner suggests, the transaction costs faced by many of the industry's pioneers were quite high. In order to offer organic products, they invested time and energy into forming personal relationships with growers so that they could distinguish authentic organic products from fraudulent ones. They also faced costs – time, energy and lost sales – in their efforts to explain the merchandise decisions to their customers. In comparison, my respondents presented transactions under the new organic program as a much more straightforward activity. For example, one manager of a conventional grocery store that has begun to carry organic foods explained to me, "Everybody has to be certified if you're going to sell it as an organic product. Once we see their certification really there is no other investigating that needs to be done." This simplification of investigation helped this retailer enter the organic business. Certification is particularly important for larger retailers, who tend to work with hundreds of suppliers and would face significant expenses if they were forced to investigate each one individually.

In addition, organizations in the organic industry face cultural pressures to conform to the national definition of organic production and to communicate their

conformity to other organizations by becoming certified under the NOP (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). One manager from a large organic wholesaler explained:

A couple of things [went into our decision to become certified]. One is marketing. One of those added marketing tools that we can use with our customers or potential new business to show them that we are organically certified and that we do care about our organic program, that we do handle it correctly. And we have also had some retailer requests because we've had some retailers that want to become organically certified and the only way they could do that was if their wholesaler was certified organic. So a couple of different things. We had retail pressures that wanted us to do it and also from a marketing standpoint, it really needed to be done.¹⁹

From a marketing standpoint, this manager explained, certification symbolizes his organization's commitment to its participation in the organic industry. It is a way to convince potential customers, which in this case are retail stores, that they should have confidence in the organization. He explains that these customers perceive certification as an indication that his company has invested time and effort to handle their organic program correctly. He also points out that organizations in the industry face direct pressures from their customers and peers to become certified. The company would have faced a significant loss of legitimacy had it resisted the norm of certification.

Formal rules promote calculability

The NOP's structure reflects the program's emphasis on formal, rationalized rules. The core of the program is known as the "materials list." This list specifies the

¹⁹ Interview, September 22, 2006.

nonorganic substances that are acceptable in the production and processing of organic foods. The OFPA mandated the creation of this list and assigned responsibility for reviewing substances to the National Organic Standards Board (see below). Although the list was finalized in 2002, it is constantly being amended as new substances intended for agricultural production come on the market and as members of the industry seek to develop new organic products.

A second feature of the NOP is the set of rules that govern the marketing of organic products. The program has established a tiered set of marketing denominations for organic products based on the proportion of organic ingredients that the products contain. This is intended to facilitate market development for *processed* organic foods (such as cereal, canned soup, or condiments) which contain multiple ingredients and are generally more profitable for large food corporations. According to these marketing standards, multiple-ingredient foods are entirely composed of organic ingredients may be advertised as “100% organic” on the front of the package. Products containing between 95% and 100% organic ingredients may be labeled simply as “organic.” This is a commonly used marketing category for products because of the trace amounts of non-organic substances that manufacturers include to aid processing, such as baking soda or salt. The program establishes another category for products that contain between 70% and 95% organic ingredients. Manufacturers may market these products with a label indicating that they are made with organic ingredients, but they cannot label the product itself as organic. Finally, products made with less than 70%

organic ingredients may list these ingredients as organic on the side panel of the package, but may not make organic claims on the front of the package.



Figure 2.1: NOP Marketing Denominations

In addition to these regulations, the USDA also allows products in the first two marketing categories to display the “USDA Organic” seal, which is meant to build consumer confidence in the integrity of these products. The program also provides for fines of up to \$11,000 for companies each time that they knowingly misuse the organic seal or the marketing rules. Figure 2.1 presents the USDA seal and a demonstration photo used by the USDA to explain the differences between the marketing categories to consumers. The small text on the front of the third cereal box from the left reads, “Made with Organic Oats, Raisins, and Dates.”

The marketing grades and materials list defined by the NOP facilitate marketing calculations on the part of industry members. For example, companies can calculate the cost of including different proportions of organic ingredients in their products in order to set a retail price that maximizes sales. One industry member explained how Newman’s Own Organics, a well-known company in the organic industry, accomplishes this.

They have kind of pioneered the practice of putting branding on "made with," I mean, non-organic "made with" products, and riding the organic branding. And what they'll do is kind of controversial, because they'll use both an organic and a conventional version of the same ingredient in a product ... And what Newman's Own will come back and say is look, we're, you know, we've done an elasticity curve and we found out that at this price point with this much organic content we're maximizing organic volume. We're just blasting it out. If we had 95% and the price was here, it would be this much organic wheat flour. But here at 70% we're at this price point and this volume, we're at a tremendous volume, we're moving that much more and creating that much more demand for the wheat flour.²⁰

²⁰ Interview, April 22, 2005.

As this industry member explains, the existence of the 70% “made with organic” marketing category under the NOP makes this company’s “elasticity curve” and other calculations possible. Defining organic in terms of ingredient proportions enables producers to test market different degrees of organicness in order to find a combination that maximizes sales. From another perspective, this industry member points out, these calculations are controversial because they involve mixing organic and conventional versions of the same ingredient, which contaminates the product in the eyes of some industry members. However, he also explains that Newman’s Own appeals to the greater good to justify this decision by pointing out that the increased sales of their products also strengthen the overall demand for organic flour. I discuss these controversies and boundaries that exist within the organic industry in detail in Chapter 4.

Formal decisionmaking procedures and predictability

Although OFPA assigned responsibility for administering the materials list to the Department of Agriculture, it also mandated the creation of an advisory board of industry stakeholders to participate in the process of drafting and modifying the list. This National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), which is composed of sixteen members nominated by people in the industry and appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, meets biannually in a public forum to discuss proposed amendments and hear and record the comments of members of the industry. These formal procedures

help bring a certain amount of predictability to the creation and development of the national organic standards. On one hand, the NOP reduces the diversity of legitimate organic meanings by establishing one official set of criteria that organic products must conform to. These are relatively permanent criteria; they “work” to organize the industry because industry members are confident that they will not change rapidly. Participants in the standards-making process feel significant pressures to create these standards that enable prediction. For example, the NOP has been working to develop regulations on access to pasture for organic dairy cows for a number of years. One member of the NOSB explained the importance of establishing this standards in order to facilitate market growth. She explained:

we’ve got to make clear to people that they are not just spinning their wheels. People will drop out of the market that really want participate. They get tired of waiting for the answers and they decide to just farm those cows conventionally. I’m tired of waiting to hear what is going to happen on pasture.²¹

Without predictable organic regulations, this industry member believes, the organic industry itself will begin to crumble. This assumes that most industry members view participation in the industry as primarily an economic venture, rather than as a way to challenge rationalized economic arrangements. This also demonstrates the importance of rationalization in creating legitimacy in the eyes of industry members.

However, the democratic accountability of the NOSB also poses some obstacles to the processes of rationalization that Ritzer describes. Although stakeholder advisory boards such as the NOSB are not uncommon in regulatory

²¹ Interview, April 10, 2007.

politics, the NOSB is distinguished by the amount of institutional power it is able to exercise over the process of writing the standards. Specifically, the NOSB has veto power over any material that is proposed to be added to the list. As one member of the NOSB explained to me in an interview:

the board has unique, legislative capacity ... in that if the NOSB doesn't say that a material can be added and they exclude it, USDA cannot go over the NOSB's head and add it. Now, we can make a recommendation to add something and they can decide not to, but if we say no, they can't say yes.²²

This institutional power has created a certain amount of tension between the NOSB and USDA regulators, this member explained, in that the USDA is not accustomed to stakeholder boards having this degree of control over regulatory activities.

The NOSB's "legislative capacity" is important from the perspective of rationalization because it institutionalizes a degree of democratic participation in process of making the standards. As a committee of industry stakeholders, the NOSB is charged with representing the diverse interests of industry members.²³ For Ritzer (and for Weber), rationalization excludes such democratic debate over the procedures and purpose of an organization (Ritzer, 2004, p. 23). By contrast, this notion of democratic participation is extremely important for legitimizing the NOP in the eyes of industry members, for some even more so than the efficiencies gained by rationalizing the definition of organic. Industry members, particularly those that have participated in forming the organic standards, emphasize that they are the product of

²² Interview, April 10, 2007.

²³ The members of the NOSB represent stakeholders in different sectors of the industry. For example, the current (2008) board includes four farmer/grower representatives, two processor/handler representatives, one retailer representative, one scientist, three consumer/public interest advocates, three environmentalists, and one certifying agent (<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nosb/members.html>).

consensus among industry members. For one of these industry members, the standards came down to the fact that “at one point there was an agreement that we’re going to agree that organic means this thing.” This agreement was legitimate, for her, in terms of representation rather than efficiency: industry members had the right to contribute to the process and have their interests heard. Similarly, one current member of the NOSB emphasized that her job involved a great deal of interaction with the public and that she, personally, was committed to bringing a variety of public voices into discussions about the organic standards. She explained,

I am a consumer public interest representative ... That means that I need to have the best information about organic consumers and the public interest to properly represent what their attitudes are and I also need to advocate for those groups. So I need to connect with consumer and public interest organizations who have strong opinions on what the board is up to. My role is not to take what they say and then go out and do it, it is to learn from what everyone is saying and be the person who has done their best homework and has the best expertise from what they have developed over their career on those groups.²⁴

This board member went on to describe the regulations governing open meetings and public participation in the board’s activities in order to emphasize the democratic character of the institution. For example, she explained, “If we’re together and we form a quorum, it has to be public. No more than nine of the board members can ever be in the same room together, or all of a sudden we’re having a public meeting and the public should have known about it in advance.” In addition, she described the public comment period that occurred during each of the board’s meetings. She continued:

I absolutely believe that that moment in the NOSB meeting where all of these different groups, people from all over the world, showing up

²⁴ Interview, April 10, 2007.

and giving their information in that public forum is there for a reason ... Those voices become part of public record. No board member gets to get off the hook. They heard it. They were sitting there and they heard from an expert come and give expert testimony.²⁵

These descriptions by the board member demonstrate the importance of appeals to democratic participation in defining the standards as a legitimate institution in the organic industry.

To a certain extent, public participation shapes the character of the NOP in directions that run counter to the tendency of complex organizational fields to rationalize their practices and procedures. For example, the NOSB rejected the use of meat and milk from cloned animals in organic foods in 2007 in response to public outcry against these procedures. Cloning represents one extension of rationalized forms of control into the food industry, as it can be used to reduce the uncertainties associated with animal breeding. Although the federal government refused to distinguish between cloned and natural animal products in the conventional foods system and declared foods made from cloned animal products safe to eat, the NOSB was able to bar clones from becoming part of the organic food system.

However, there are also important limits on institutionalized democratic participation within the NOP. For one thing, the democratic process is representative, which limits the extent to which all voices can be heard. As the representative quoted above pointed out, her job was not simply to bring the voices of consumer groups to the table in board meetings, but rather to select legitimate concerns from among the statements of a variety of consumers. In addition, she emphasized the role of experts

²⁵ Interview, April 10, 2007.

(rather than the general public) in informing the board's decisions. In a separate interview, another member of the NOSB elaborated on this practice. She explained that in an effort to develop a standard governing aquaculture (fish farming) products, the NOSB had convened a conference of peer reviewed presentations by university researchers. The NOSB intended to use these research papers to inform their discussions of proposed standards. To the extent that professional expertise, and particularly scientific knowledge, contributes to rationalization, these activities by the NOSB are likely to lead the standards in this direction.

Rationalized protest

The NOP is therefore an institution that contributes in significant ways to the efficiency, calculability and predictability of organizational practices in the organic industry, although it also contains some features that resist such rationalization. However, perhaps the most striking feature of the NOP is its ability to direct a great deal of social-movement-style protest within the organic industry into institutional channels. In other words, the NOP acts as a "technology" (in Ritzer's sense) that controls transgressive protest within the organic industry. I do not mean to imply that protest campaigns, which I will shortly describe, are ineffective. In fact, organized activity has influenced the content of the standards in important ways. However, the extent to which the NOP has shaped the character of these resistance campaigns themselves is striking. These campaigns frequently buy into the idea that standards are

a legitimate way to organize the industry, although they may disagree with the content of the organic standards. They also tend to reinforce the legitimacy of the underlying law that authorizes the standards. In other words, although these campaigns attempt to inject more public participation into the standards governing the industry, they rarely disagree entirely with the idea of an at least semi-rationalized, rule governed organic industry.

Perhaps the most well known campaign related to the organic standards took place in 1997, when the USDA released a preliminary version of the organic standards. These proposed standards evoked significant resistance from both industry members and consumers because they would have allowed several processes to be used in the production and processing of organic foods that many industry members felt were not compatible with organic agriculture, including ingredients made from genetically modified plants, irradiation of organic fruits and vegetables as a way to kill pests and pathogens, and the use of municipal sewage sludge as fertilizer on organic cropland. In response to these proposals, the USDA received an overwhelming number of negative comments from members of the industry and the public and eventually withdrew the proposed regulations and reissued them without including these so-called “Big Three” (Allen & Kovach, 2000; Fromartz, 2006; Guthman, 2004a; Ingram & Ingram, 2005; Zvestoski et al., 2006). However, many industry members who opposed the controversial provisions strongly supported the organic standards themselves as a form of regulation in the industry. For example, one manager of a natural foods co-op store, when describing her organization’s role in this

debate, recounted that “when they tried to put irradiated sludge into organic standards, we definitely were agitated about that and generated thousands of [negative] comments out of our store.” However, in the next breath, she praised the current standards as a rationalizing force in the organic industry:

I think that the standards to create a chain so that you can actually trace the production back to the farm, to the distributor, into the truck and to the store is a good safeguard. So we all follow certain receiving and labeling and handling requirements to be sure that by the time you are buying an apple that says it is organic it has stayed organic since it was picked. Since it was grown, I should say.²⁶

This professional clearly supports the predictability and efficiency that is made possible by rationalized standards. However, she is concerned about whether the content of the standards upholds her view of what organic means.

A second important challenge to the organic standards occurred in 2006. In contrast to the broad-based reaction to the proposed standards in 1997, this campaign was organized by a smaller group of organizations and led by a single person, an organic farmer and certifier named Arthur Harvey. Harvey had filed a lawsuit in federal court alleging that the organic standards administered by the NOP violated the OFPA, the underlying law that authorized their creation. In particular, he argued that the inclusion of synthetic ingredients in the National List (see above) was prohibited by law (Fromartz, 2006, p. 203).²⁷ Like the earlier campaign, this one did not challenge the existence of the organic standards as such, but rather focused on the

²⁶ Interview, October 10, 2005.

²⁷ Specifically, Harvey and his supporters objected to the inclusion of material such as baking soda, xanthum gum, and pectin, which are essential for food processing and the manufacture of packaged goods. Harvey argued that these ingredients created a “slippery slope” that opened the standards to pressure from conventional ingredients manufacturers and rendered organic claims meaningless (Fromartz, 2006, p. 206).

content of the standards and the procedures and substances that they allowed. Nevertheless, it was taken quite seriously by many members of the organic industry, who argued that it would force the majority of organic products to be relabeled and would undermine consumer demand for organics (Fromartz, 2006, pp. 206-207). Although the lawsuit succeeded in a federal court, the Organic Trade Association convinced members of Congress to pass an amendment to change OFPA so that these substances would be allowed in organic production. This action led to criticism within the industry directed against back-room dealing. Although this criticism indicated that certain members of the industry believed that the NOP needed more public participation and transparency, it did not question the idea that there should be a set of formal rules governing organic production.

Both the 1997 campaign and the Harvey lawsuit demonstrate a tendency towards institutionalized activism. In both cases, challengers made use of formal political mechanisms, such as designated public comment periods and the courts, to mobilize and press for their claims. In addition, both sets of challengers agreed in principle with the existence of formal, rationalized rules governing the organic foods industry. Although these campaigns (particularly the 1997 campaign) were not without consequences, they illustrate the ability of the NOP to control transgressive protest and thus to promote rationalization of the industry. As several social movements scholars have pointed out, protests that rely on institutionalized political channels and organizations tend to be less challenging to the status quo (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Staggenborg, 1988).

As I have tried to emphasize throughout this discussion, however, the NOP facilitates the rationalization of the organic industry but does not create an “iron cage” (Weber, 2001). Some organizations and professionals have sought to opt out of rationalization by returning to the earlier patchwork of local certification programs and standards in an effort to go “beyond organic”. For example, the members of one co-op store where I conducted research had launched a new marketing program around a set of regulations that they had developed. These regulations emphasized criteria that were similar to those in organic foods production, but also required that those producers which used livestock follow specific animal welfare practices and that the producers be located within a three hundred mile radius of the store. According to members of the store, this program went “beyond organic” by channeling resources to local food producers and helping to create a regional economy of producers who used organic methods. Both Ritzer and Weber explain that such small-scale organizational efforts may present an alternative to rationalized organizations (Ritzer, 2004, pp. 200-233; Weber, 1978a, p. 224). However, the program developed by this store relied on the same logic as the NOP. It established a set of rules that created a certain degree of efficiency and predictability – of rationalization – within this local food market. The extent of rationalization and of resistance to it in the organic industry is therefore somewhat difficult to judge.

The mainstream food industry and organics

In 2006, the giant discount chain Wal-Mart went public with a commitment to offer a complete line of organic products in its over 4,000 United States stores (Featherstone, 2006). This news promised to change the organic industry in several ways. First, this decision promised to exponentially increase demand for organically grown products. Not only would this change create economic opportunities for many members of the industry, it would also create incentives to transfer cropland and livestock operations to organic management practices. Wal-Mart's decision also expanded access to organic foods for customers with less income and education than the typical Whole Foods shopper. In fact, Wal-Mart claimed that it would sell its organic products for no more than a 10% premium over the already low cost of their conventional counterparts (Pollan, 2006a). In a market where customers routinely paid premiums of 50% or more for organic foods, this was startling news. Perhaps most strikingly, though, Wal-Mart's decision seemed to mark a leap forward in the rationalization of the organic industry. Wal-Mart has a well-earned reputation amongst retailers for bringing an unprecedented level of efficiency, coordination and cost-cutting to supply-chain management. With its new position as a leader in organic retailing, industry observers expected that the chain would apply these same techniques to achieve a partial reorganization of the organic industry.

Wal-Mart's announcement was exciting for many in the industry, as it seemed to present vast new opportunities for growth. However, others greeted it with

skepticism. Veteran industry reporter and best-selling author Michael Pollan complained:

Wal-Mart will buy its organic food from whichever producers can produce it most cheaply, and these will not be the sort of farmers you picture when you hear the word 'organic.' Big supermarkets want to do business only with big farmers growing lots of the same thing ... because it's easier to buy all your carrots from a single megafarm than to contract with hundreds of smaller growers. The 'transaction costs' are lower, even when the price and quality are the same ... Wal-Mart [also] has a reputation for driving down prices by squeezing its suppliers, especially after those suppliers have invested heavily to boost production to feed the Wal-Mart maw. When that happens, the notion of responsibly-priced food will be sacrificed to the imperatives of survival and the pressure to cut corners will become irresistible. (Pollan, 2006a)

For Pollan, a vocal critic of rationalization and growth in the organic industry, and for others, Wal-Mart's methods represented a threat to the industry's identity as an alternative to conventional techniques of food production. By seeking to lower prices through contracts with large-scale food producers and then by encouraging these suppliers to "cut corners" as much as possible within the limits established by the federal organic regulations, Pollan believed that Wal-Mart would contribute to creating an organic industry that mirrored the conventional foods industry. The first thing to be lost in the pursuit of efficiency and profit would be commitments to social and environmental responsibility. Increasing access to organic foods was important, Pollan argued, but not at the cost of ethical commitments that make organic foods distinctive.

For all of the debate over Wal-Mart's announcement, the outcome of this episode caught both its supporters and its detractors by surprise. In 2007, the retailer

announced that after reviewing its sales figures, it had decided to scale back its plans for organics. Rather than offering a full line of organic products in each store, the managers of stores would make independent decisions about which organic products, if any, they would carry on the basis of local markets and sales trends (Gogoi, 2007). Although the retailer claimed that the press had misinterpreted its 2006 statements and that this announcement did not contradict its earlier plans, industry members and observers were puzzled. How could Wal-Mart, with its hyper-rationalized management and marketing systems, have misinterpreted its role in the organic market?

This section of the chapter examines this question posed by the Wal-Mart episode. I argue that features of the organic industry create uncertainties that challenge the rationalized practices of mainstream retailers. I focus on three sorts of uncertainties that these mainstream companies face. The first set of uncertainties derives from the history of the organic industry and from the physical characteristics of some organic products. These factors pose challenges for mainstream companies because they impede the application of rationalized techniques of efficiency and control. By contrast, a second set of uncertainties results not from organics alone, but from structural changes in the grocery retailing sector more generally. Retailers have turned to organics as one way to respond to these changes, but the outcomes of their organic ventures are far from clear. Finally, consumer activists like Michael Pollan create a third set of uncertainties for industry members.

The uncertainties of organics

One set of problems that members of the mainstream food industry face as they try to absorb organic foods into rationalized systems of retailing stem from the organization of the organic industry and from the characteristics of organic products. The changes wrought by Wal-Mart notwithstanding, the organic industry is a good deal more fragmented and diverse than the conventional foods industry. Because the organic industry evolved along a separate path from the conventional foods industry, it developed arrangements that are less efficient from a mainstream perspective. For example, a national category manager from one of the largest natural foods retail chains explained,

There's a very deep entrenchment of infrastructure around the conventional food business, because they have been in business for a long time and built lots of warehouses and trucking lines and efficiencies. The truth about natural and organic foods is that while it is growing quickly it is still a smaller piece of the food pie and a younger industry and so the logistical infrastructure out there is not as well developed, so the cost and the effort to get products that are terrific everywhere that you would like them, the effort and the cost is greater in some cases than you know, just plug and play from Proctor and Gamble to some Wal-Mart warehouse or something. So I think more time and expense goes into figuring out a way to actually get innovative new products from smaller companies to market.²⁸

This industry professional described the disorganized organic foods supply chain as the most challenging aspect of his job. He pointed out that his responsibilities and the role that he played within his organization were virtually identical to those of a conventional foods category manager. However, the state of the industry created

²⁸ Interview, April 5, 2007.

additional challenges that someone involved in the more routine conventional foods industry might not face. Another store manager, this time from a conventional, mass market supermarket, elaborated on the challenges industry disorganization posed for retailers trying to secure a consistent supply of merchandise.

There aren't that many organic producers out there and you know, when those organic levels, because they are on the increase overall nationally, when those levels get depleted there's no other resources to go to ... In the produce department there will be certain areas where you can only find one tomato supplier that will supply you or one apple supplier that has any product and when he runs out, it's all over.²⁹

The shortages of supply that this manager remarked on proved to be of concern for professionals throughout the industry. At several of the conferences that I attended, other professionals remarked that supply uncertainties were one of the main obstacles to industry growth.

In addition to features related to the historical development of the organic industry, the industry's recent, rapid growth has attracted a significant amount of entrepreneurial energy. While industry members explain that this innovation makes the organic industry a unique and exciting place to work, it also poses its own set of challenges to efforts to rationalize the industry. One public relations consultant to these companies explained the problem:

There are companies that are being run by people that really don't have any business acumen at all. They don't have enough funding, they don't understand what it takes to get a product to market. Maybe this is the first time they have ever launched a product of any sort or even done a business for themselves.³⁰

²⁹ Interview, August 26, 2006.

³⁰ Interview, March 28, 2007.

She recounted that while running a press room at a major organic trade conference, she had asked companies for samples of new products to give to reporters. Of the sixty items she received, at least five were

organic t-shirts that are just plain organic t-shirts, just by five different companies. And to me, those are five new companies entering a market that is already pretty flooded with organic t-shirt companies. So all of those companies to me forgot to look at what is out there already and they are kind of producing something that is pretty common.³¹

For new companies, such problems of crowding in combination with the limited shelf space at retail stores result in difficulties placing products in retail channels and in failure for many organic start-up companies. For the broader industry, it is likely that this churning of companies works against efforts to establish stable and predictable supply chains.

The challenges to rationalization created by the industry's organization are compounded by challenges that result from the physical characteristics of organic products themselves. This is particularly the case with fresh produce and other unprocessed products. The mainstream food industry operates in part by using technology to control the spoilage of food and to extend shelf life. The organics category manager for a national produce distribution company illustrated how such technologies shape the life cycle of a conventional lemon:

Conventional lemons are picked in November or December and they are sold to you in April or May. They are picked green and heavily coated with wax. They are put in a storage room and put in a sleep, basically. Come April, May, or June, they are pulled out of storage and put in a room called the atmosphere room. That room is bought to temperature, which brings on the yellow color. They re-run the product

³¹ Interview, March 28, 2007.

through a chlorine wash, which cleans it up. It is re-waxed and sold to you.³²

However, many of these mechanisms of control are prohibited by the regulations that govern the processing of organic foods. My informant continued with a comparison between organic and conventional lemons.

Conventional lemons, what they do is they put a wax and fungicide mixture on the lemon. They coat it. What they have done is put a force field. They put this force field around it so if there was any nick or any open wound on the rind, the air can't get to it because there is wax on it. Therefore, you are going to have a longer shelf life at room temperature because the decay process is virtually cut off because there is no air getting to that open wound. You can't do these things to organics. So if there is an unseen nick or an open wound on any piece of product, your shelf life is going to be smaller.³³

These characteristics of organic products contribute to the uncertainties that members of the industry, particularly retailers, face. Retailers may not be able to tell in advance whether organic produce has been damaged in ways that will shorten its shelf life. In addition, organic produce moves off the shelves less quickly than conventional produce, according to members of the industry that I spoke to. These factors make it more difficult for retailers to minimize the amount of organic merchandise that goes to waste due to spoilage in comparison to conventional merchandise (this wastage is called "shrink" in the retail industry). In addition, the manager pointed out that organic produce may have a different appearance than conventional produce (he explained that organic lemons, being fresher, frequently had a "greenish tinge"). This challenges retailers' ability to maintain predictable and uniform product appearance standards.

³² Interview, December 13, 2006.

³³ Interview, December 13, 2006.

The challenges to rationalization created by the organization of the industry and by the physical characteristics of organic products are significant. However, it appears that members of the organic industry are working to resolve them. In other words, these factors appear to slow down the process of rationalization, not halt it permanently. At least one member of the industry characterized the industry's current disorganization as characteristic of most new and growing industries and predicted that these relationships will become smoother in the future. One organic foods distributor derisively noted that competition has forced "a lot of the shoe clerks and feather merchants" to leave the industry. Similarly, as processed organic foods, with their longer shelf life, become a larger part of organic sales, problems of shrink in organic produce will become less important. Members of the industry are also working to find ways within the boundaries set by the organic standards to extend the shelf life of fresh foods and to make them cosmetically more similar to their conventional counterparts.

Structural changes and uncertainty

In contrast to the uncertainties created by the organic industry's disorganization and by the characteristics of some organic products, which seem temporary in nature, the uncertainties created by structural changes in the food and grocery industry are more permanent and far-reaching. These changes involve shifts in the ownership of supermarket companies and the emergence of new business models.

Together, these structural changes have placed significant pressures on traditional mainstream supermarkets and have raised concerns amongst industry professionals that this retail form, which was very successful in the 1970s and 1980s, has become obsolete.

Many of the members of the mainstream grocery industry that I spoke to during my research explained that competition in the grocery industry had begun to increase in the 1980s and is currently at unprecedented levels. In part, this competition results from the saturation of the grocery market and from a wave of acquisitions and corporate consolidations. One university researcher who studies the grocery industry explained:

The [grocery] industry has become much more concentrated so that fewer and fewer players control more of the market. As a result, they have become head-to-head competitors in more markets than in the past. Food retailing was historically a very local and regional business and there was no such thing as a national food retailing company. Now, more and more of the largest players are indeed nearly national or have national presence. So they are competing against each other in more and more markets and they are larger and most of the major ones are publicly held, which means they are accountable to Wall Street to meet quarterly targets. So the industry has become in that sense more competitive.³⁴

In addition, discount superstores and gourmet grocers have challenged the position of mainstream, mass-market supermarkets. The discount model is best represented by Wal-Mart (which, according to the company's website, is currently the largest retailer in the world). Wal-Mart sells products primarily by offering low prices, which it achieves through aggressive supply chain management. Because of the size of

³⁴ Interview, September 11, 2006.

its orders, Wal-Mart can in many circumstances dictate terms to its suppliers.

Although Wal-Mart is secretive about its business operations, one anecdote offered by an industry professional during an interview illustrates this practice. Early in his career, this professional worked for Coca-Cola as a sales manager on the Wal-Mart account. One day, he reported, he received a bill from Wal-Mart for \$8 million, which had lost money on sales of Coke products because Coca-Cola had offered a discounted price to one of its competitors. Although this was not a standard practice, Coca-Cola paid the bill because of the importance of the Wal-Mart account. The fact that such a large and powerful company agreed to Wal-Mart's unconventional terms illustrates the retailer's clout.³⁵

While Wal-Mart now dominates the lower end of the grocery market (and other retail markets), Whole Foods Market has advanced a very different model that attracts more affluent consumers. The retail chain, which began as an independent natural foods store in Austin, Texas, in 1980, presents grocery shopping as an enjoyable, educational and creative experience. Whole Foods stores carry only organic foods and products that meet the company's guidelines for being "natural." In addition, the stores have features such as wine tasting bars, chocolate fountains for dipping fruit and desserts, and book sections with selections on homeopathic health

³⁵ I was not able to interview any representatives of Wal-Mart during my research. When I contacted the company's press line, a press relations agent told me that company policy prohibited employees from participating in research projects. I was also unable to use personal contacts to reach a member of the company, which proved more successful in my other interviews (see Methodological Appendix). However, several popular articles and at least one academic book (Lichtenstein, 2006) have examined the company's management practices and its influence on suppliers. For example, the *New York Times* reported in 2006 that Coca-Cola had agreed to reformulate the ingredients of one of its product after a request from Wal-Mart (Warner, 2006).

care, organic gardening and environmental issues. Newspaper stories abound of shoppers using Whole Foods stores for a meal out (as an alternative to a restaurant), for fun dates and even to make an engagement proposal (Renton, 2007). Unlike Wal-Mart, Whole Foods' high-priced perception has earned it the not-so-fun nickname "Whole Paycheck."

These changes in retailing models have squeezed mainstream grocery stores. On one hand, these stores have a very difficult time competing on price with Wal-Mart. As one mainstream grocery distributor explained:

We've lost the price battle. The price has been won by Wal-Mart. They bought it. They marketed it, they bought it, they own it. Even if they're higher priced, they own the price ... They went out there and they paid for that perception. They did a good job and now they have it. No one's going to take it from them.³⁶

In other words, even if mainstream stores are able to offer some products at lower prices, they cannot compete on the whole with Wal-Mart's advertising campaigns and branding as lowest-priced store in the market. On the other hand, these mainstream chains lack the design, infrastructure and knowledge to create the shopping experiences typical of Whole Foods Market and other gourmet stores. One respondent, a marketing consultant, summarized this problem:

You know, what is amazing is that grocery stores really haven't changed in about fifty years. If you look at what they are, they are a great model of how to warehouse products but they are not really very enjoyable, pleasurable experiences that have much to do with who we are.³⁷

Somewhat more graphically, the grocery distributor quoted above remarked,

³⁶ Interview, September 22, 2006.

³⁷ Interview, March 10, 2006.

We've become very stale over the years. When you look across the grocery network and you look across all the chains at a traditional grocery store ... You come in, you buy your groceries, you go home. Little excitement, kind of a pain in the butt to go grocery shopping. When you look at that, and that is what everybody did, the only way to grow your market share is to create some excitement within your store and to differentiate yourself.³⁸

The differentiation that this professional refers to involves the rejection of visible symbols of rationalization on the part of many retailers and food companies. Whereas predictability, efficiency and low prices were once seen as the key to success in the grocery industry, members of the industry now portray them as problematic. In a broader sense, differentiation in the grocery industry fits into patterns of “flexible” economic organization that involve “much greater attention to quick-changing fashions ... and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion and the commodification of cultural forms” (Harvey, 1990, p. 156; Roseberry, 1996). The concept of differentiation surfaced in several of the interviews that I conducted and was referred to by speakers in the industry conferences that I attended. At one of these conferences, the annual meeting of the Produce Marketing Association, differentiation figured as a central topic in the keynote address presented by the association’s president. This speaker linked differentiation to what he called the “decommoditization” of fruits, vegetables and other food products, which he defined as “the art of converting a commodity into a value-added product.” He suggested to his audience that they needed to fight to prevent a situation where the industry’s products would be distinguished solely on

³⁸ Interview, September 22, 2006.

price. Instead, he presented a variety of less calculable features of products that would contribute to “decommoditization,” including flavor, which he defined as “an emotion made up of technical components,” and local production, which enabled consumers to feel connected to other people and to trust in the purity of the products. His speech demonstrated an ambivalent relationship to rationalization. Through coordinated, international distribution systems, he explained, the industry has “raised the bar and eliminated seasonality, but the resulting sameness cries out for new forms of differentiation.” Similarly, he noted that while centralized and technologically advanced food production and processing operations led to more advanced safeguards for food purity, it also made food production seem anonymous and machine-like. He explained that the industry has to walk a line between technological development and coordination and the less rationalized features of consumer experience and emotion.

Efforts by food and grocery companies to move in less obviously rationalized directions create uncertainties because they are leaving behind established structures and practices and have little clear evidence of how these changes will work. Because organic products figure centrally in these differentiation and decommoditization strategies, these uncertainties are particularly visible in relation to them. In the first place, the investments that many retailers have made in organics are speculative. One distributor compared them to the industry’s investments in prepared fruits and vegetables, which caused retailers to lose money for a number of years before becoming profitable.

It is the same thing with organics right now. We’re in that stage when nobody’s making a lot of money ... Everybody’s saying, you’ve got to

have an organic program, but are the consumers ready for it? And in some stores maybe they don't need an organic program. Maybe the consumers aren't ready for it. So it is a lot of shrink and a lot of dollars spent on the product right now in the hopes that this thing will grow into something very profitable like the value added salads and some of the others were.³⁹

This uncertainty about whether organic products will be profitable and for whom is compounded by a lack of understanding about what organic products actually do for a retail store. In other words, there is little consensus about which sorts of customers buy organic products, why they do so, and in what circumstances. One trade association representative outlined this problem:

There are more people coming into the [organic] category but the data also shows that for a lot of people they are choosing organic products for a special occasion or they choose them, or maybe they choose one thing regularly and the rest of the cart isn't organic regularly ... [Like] maybe if you are trying to impress your mother in law then you will buy the organic one ... I think there are millions of people out there who are doing their same sort of personal value calculations about their purchases just like that.⁴⁰

A marketing manager for a national organic company described the challenge faced by retailers in a similar way. She pointed out that retailers preferred to allocate shelf space to items that sold quickly. Because organic products usually "turn" more slowly than conventional products, some retailers hesitate about whether to stock them.

However, she explained:

they've also got to look at the big picture and having an organic offering, even if it's slower turning items, if they're higher priced or if they inspire complementary purchases, maybe its for upscale consumers who are buying nice wine and cheese so you need to have

³⁹ Interview, September 22, 2006.

⁴⁰ Interview, December 7, 2006.

those organic items there. There are a lot of other dynamics at play besides just the turns of any one particular item.⁴¹

Both of these industry members point out that it is difficult for mainstream supermarkets to calculate the profitability of organics in a straightforward way because the behavior of consumers that shop for organics is unpredictable. The first professional explains that most people do not buy organic products exclusively. Instead, they shift back and forth between conventional and organic products on the basis of “personal value calculations” that include consideration of special occasions and private concerns. The second respondent adds that although organic products themselves may not be as profitable as conventional products for a store, they may “inspire complementary purchases” of high-priced items and attract “upscale consumers” who spend more money during a shopping trip. It is important to recognize that these patterns of consumer behavior are not unique to organic retailing, although the perishability of organic foods adds a more unique dimension of the challenge for retailers.⁴² However, these uncertainties go a certain distance towards impeding retailers’ efforts to create a rationalized, profit-maximizing approach to handling organics.

A final example demonstrates the difficulty that retailers have in rationalizing organics along the same lines as mainstream, conventional products. For mainstream products, retailers often charge manufacturers a sum known as a “slotting fee.” The slotting fee is understood within the industry as a form of rent that manufacturers pay

⁴¹ Interview, April 10, 2007.

⁴² For example, Miller notes that department stores began to carry books in the early 20th century as “loss leaders” that would attract customers to buy other, more profitable, items (Miller, 2006).

to retailers so that their products may occupy a particular amount of retail shelf space.⁴³ Generally, slotting fees are fixed and non-negotiable and increase the calculability of transactions within the industry. However, the uncertainty surrounding the retailing of organics has contributed to the ability of producers to negotiate and in some cases avoid paying slotting fees. One marketing manager explained:

We rarely ever pay slotting fees. Instead we, I always try to get the money directly to the consumer. So instead of slotting, I try to negotiate demos to consumers to try to help them learn about our product. TPRs, which means temporary price reductions, so the products are on deal again so that the consumers will try them out. Free fill is another thing that I will offer, or BOGO, which is buy one get one. These are all things that I can do.⁴⁴

Because retailers are uncertain about how to calculate the demand and turnover of organic products, they are willing to try out a variety of less calculable forms of exchange with producers.

Activists and uncertainty

A final obstacle to rationalization is posed by consumer activists that oppose rationalization and industry growth. People in the organic community paid close attention to an exchange between Michael Pollan, a journalist and author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and John Mackey, the CEO of Whole Foods Market, the

⁴³ Slotting fees are a controversial institution because smaller producers view them as anticompetitive. The controversy has attracted high-level political attention. In the 1990s, slotting fees were the subject of a Congressional investigation for this reason (*Slotting fees: Are family farmers battling to stay on the farm and in the grocery store?*, 2000; *Slotting: Fair for small businesses and consumers?*, 1999).

⁴⁴ Interview, April 10, 2007.

nation's largest organic and natural foods grocery chain. The exchange was prompted by Pollan's critical description of Whole Foods in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.

In an open letter to Pollan that was published on the Whole Foods Market website on May 25, 2006, Mackey applauded Pollan's efforts to teach his readers that "their everyday choices do make a difference both in the food supply chain and the environmental sustainability of the planet." But he disagreed with Pollan's characterization of Whole Foods as "big" or "industrial" organic. Instead, he argued, "Whole Foods Market has done more to advance the natural and organic foods movement in general and local organic growers and artisanal food producers specifically than any other business currently operating in North America." Mackey went on to defend the claim by listing several features of the company: stores and regional distribution centers have autonomy to purchase products from local growers and producers, some stores feature locally-raised grass-fed beef during part of the year, the company has worked independently to develop "Animal Compassionate Standards (which several European countries have in place but which are lacking in the US)" and to provide financial assistance to "compassionate" producers. In addition, Mackey argued, "Whole Foods Market was a pioneer in the organic arena; we did not wait to 'get on board' with organic until its health and environmental benefits were corroborated by science and economic analysis." He noted that Whole Foods had participated in drafting the National Organic Standards, had "led the citizen outcry at the potential diminishment of organic livestock feeding standards," had responded to public concerns about animal treatment in organic dairies by ending a

contract with a supplier found to be a “CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation) using organic feed and ... violating the spirit of the current organic dairy standards.” Mackey concluded by considering the future of the industry:

The organic movement has largely grown in response to the industrialization of agriculture. It is a reform movement that has been growing and evolving for less than 60 years, and didn't gain any serious traction until about 20 years ago ... We now know that getting the synthetic chemicals off our farms and out of our food is only the first stage in the Organic Reformation. Much, much more is needed – especially with improving the soil, dismantling CAFOs, improving local organic production and availability, and improving animal welfare. Rather than despair that the Organic Reformation has been corrupted by the industrialization of agriculture, I believe that we simply need to evolve to the next level ... As an organization we continually challenge ourselves to be responsible and ethical tenants of the planet. Through our stores, large and small organic farmers, both local and international, can offer their products to an increasingly educated population that is more interested in organics every day ... Michael, Whole Foods Market is one of the ‘good guys’ in this story about the ‘industrialization of agriculture.’ We want to transform our food procurement pathways into more holistic, ecological and sustainable systems. We should be working together as allies to accomplish this essential mission.

In a response to Mackey's letter posted on his own website on June 14, 2006,

Pollan acknowledged several of these points but continued to push the envelope.

Addressing Mackey, he wrote:

you are in as strong a position as any individual in America today to help rebuild local food chains and build a market for pasture-based livestock farming. I don't need to tell you how important these two things are – or that the survival of local agriculture is critical to preserving farmland near America's metropolitan areas; to reducing our consumption of fossil fuel; and to making the food system better able to withstand threats, whether from pathogens or terrorists (or both) ... Grass farming represents one of the most encouraging trends in American agriculture today, holding out great promise for improving the health of the animals, of the American land, and of the American consumer.

He argued that the growth of the organic industry created costs, including “the sacrifice of small farmers and of some of the founding principles of organic farming” and asked whether the company’s buyers specifically sought to source their products locally and had the authority to pay a premium for local produce “in the same way they now routinely pay a premium for organic.” Urging Mackey to “take a broader view of the matter,” Pollan concluded, “I sincerely hope that ... the company has not thrown its lot in with the industrialization, globalization and dilution of organic agriculture, but rather stands for something better.”⁴⁵

What is going on here? Pollan’s challenge to Mackey is an example of another way that the organic industry resists rationalization and consolidation – through challenges by activists and activist groups against selected companies that are portrayed as undermining the integrity or meanings of organics. Another well-publicized challenge was directed against Wal-Mart, which increased the organic products sold in its stores in 2006. A non-profit “consumer watchdog” group called the Cornucopia Institute accused Wal-Mart of misleading customers by placing non-organic dairy products on a shelf labeled as “organic.” The specific criticism fit into a broader portrayal of the discount retailer as interested only in the margins offered by organic products, rather than the social, ecological or health mission of organic

⁴⁵ As of this writing (March 28, 2008) both letters are accessible on the World Wide Web. Mackey’s letter is at <http://wholefoodsmarket.com/socialmedia/jmackey/2006/05/26/an-open-letter-to-michael-pollan/>. Pollan’s reply is at <http://www.michaelpollan.com/article.php?id=80>.

production. The Cornucopia Institute filed a legal complaint against Wal-Mart, which, according to them, refused to change the signs on the products.⁴⁶

These activist challenges can damage a company's credibility for consumers and its sales. One public relations consultant to the organic industry explained, "the organic industry really has to be careful with what they say and do a lot more than the conventional industry would have to ... Nobody really cares about what is in [conventional] products until they get in trouble for it. But the organic industry has to make sure that they are buttoned up all the time." A marketing manager from an organic company offered more a more detailed critique of activist campaigns. In her experience,

Consumers are confused about exactly what organic means and I think that any time the organic industry fights with itself in a public forum, it adds to the confusion and it damages the credibility. So I am against airing out organic dirty laundry in any way, shape or form. I think that the differences that we have amongst ourselves, we should absolutely voice, but not in a way that disparages other companies ... [Activists] who are known to be very big advocates of strong organic standards on one hand but also very loud in an unpleasant way, you know, they pick up the megaphone and it hurts everybody ... The net effect of something like that I believe is not good. It's not good even for the people that they are purportedly trying to protect because the consumers are even more confused.⁴⁷

It is important to look on this professional's evaluation of activists with a critical eye because she is not a disinterested observer, but an active participant in these debates.

The activists that she described represent their intents and the effects of their work in a

⁴⁶ The Cornucopia action is described in the press release "Organic Fraud: Wal-Mart Stores Inc. Accused of Widespread Distortion." The document is available at <http://cornucopia.org/index.php/organic-fraud-wal-mart-stores-inc-accused-of-widespread-distortion/>, accessed April 22, 2008.

⁴⁷ Interview, April 10, 2007.

different way. My purpose here is not to suggest that one way of looking at activism is correct, but rather to point out that such activism can have a significant impact on the fortunes of companies in the organic industry.

One way that companies have responded to activist consumers is by trying to create “robust identities.” This term was developed by sociologists researching political power to identify the ability of some powerholders to present different identities to different constituencies in order to hold a network of support together (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Padgett & Ansell, 1993). Mainstream companies in the organic industry face a similar problem. They must present a rationalized face to shareholders, bankers and other members of the mainstream business world but also appear to respect the claims of consumers and activist that resist rationalization.

According to the public relations consultant quoted above, one way that businesses do this is by securing personnel who possess credibility within the organic foods industry:

The companies who are the smartest ones out there, General Mills for example when they bought Small Planet Foods, which is Cascadian Farm and Muir Glen, they kept the CEO, Gene Kahn, as their vice president of sustainability for their entire company. So not only does he work to help them with their organic products, but he works to help them with all areas of sustainability of the company. So the smarter, big corporations are doing that. They are keeping, Cascadian Farm for example kept their sourcing agents on as employees. They have been there since the beginning and they are not going anywhere. Their jobs are golden because they know where they get the good organic sources and the valid ones that are not cheating the system. So there are many examples of that throughout the industry and throughout the major corporation side of the organic industry.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Interview, March 28, 2007.

Another professional that I spoke to, who began her career at General Mills, explained that her first responsibility was to create “an education center called Small Planet Foods University” within the company that connected employees with “the luminaries of the [organic] industry at that point in time.” Similarly, John Mackey and Whole Foods Market responded to Michael Pollan’s criticism by emphasizing their commitment to buying produce from farmers in the regions surrounding their stores, their opposition to the highly rationalized CAFO operations, and their respect for the “spirit” of organic, not simply the letter of the law. These practices may increase the credibility of the companies that adopt them within the organic industry. However, they also reinforce the perception of differences between organic and conventional foods and add staff and programs that may not appear necessary from a purely rationalized, efficiency-focused point of view. In addition, these responses can make efforts to assimilate organic products to the structures and practices of the mainstream industry more difficult.

Rationalization and the future of the organic industry

This chapter has argued that as the organic industry has grown in the past two decades, it has developed rationalized structures along the lines that would be predicted by Ritzer’s model of rationalized organization. I have explained that the National Organic Program (NOP), which administers federal standards that regulate organic production and marketing, has contributed to rationalization by creating a

single definition of organic production, formal rules for organic marketing, a more or less predictable process of rule-generation, and by institutionalizing protest. However, I also noted that the NOP has features which do not fit Ritzer's rationalization model, such as the institutional power of the stakeholder-composed National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). Turning to the retail side of the organic industry, I showed that features of organic products, the organic industry, the broader supermarket industry, and the campaigns of activists create obstacles for mainstream stores that are trying to assimilate organic products to rationalized practices and structures.

These observations raise important theoretical and practical questions. Is the rationalization of the organic industry inevitable, as Ritzer would predict? If this is the case, the amalgamation of rationalized and non-rationalized arrangements that I have described is only a pit stop on the way to a full victory for formal rationality. Alternatively, are there features of the organic industry that will cause uneven rationalization to persist? If so, what are they? By turning to Max Weber's original discussions of formal rationality, I am able to offer some suggestive ideas and hypotheses that may contribute to our understanding of this point.

Although Weber argued that formal rationality was the central to the culture and organization of modern societies, he also noted the tendency of organizations based on formal rationality to supplement themselves with other sorts of legitimating forces. In other words, Weber argued that calculation alone cannot maintain the stable social orders upon which calculation itself depends. This argument appeared in his discussion of government bureaucracy, in which he explained that individualistic

calculations of self-interest tend to undermine bureaucratic stability. Instead, he explained, “normally other elements, affectual and ideal, supplement such interests” (Weber, 1978a, p. 213). Weber offered the example of a bureaucrat who shows up for work on time every day not “only on the basis of custom or self-interest which he could disregard if he wanted to; as a rule, his action is also determined by the validity of an order (the civil service rules), which he fulfills partly ... because its violation would be abhorrent to his sense of duty” (Weber, 1978a, p. 31). In this case, the formally rational bureaucratic organizations relies on the (irrational) commitment of its members to the validity and value of its rules.

Weber’s discussion of markets, which he viewed as the most formally rational of all social institutions, paralleled his account of bureaucracy. He argued that stable markets depend on a “ideal” commitment to a market ethic on the part of participants, based on the assumption “by both partners to an exchange that each will be interested in the future continuation of the exchange relationship, be it with this particular partner or with some other, and that he will adhere to his promises for this reason and avoid at least striking infringements to the rules of good faith and fair dealing” (see also Granovetter, 1985; Weber, 1978a, p. 637). Similarly, he noted that the *demand* for goods in a market frequently derives from ideal factors, not from pure calculation that is indifferent to such things as quality and status (Weber, 1978a, p. 108). Pure calculation alone cannot create stable markets.

What does this have to do with the organic industry and with the phenomena that I have discussed in this chapter? It suggests that the success of organic foods in

the market may result from ideal factors that lie outside of the scope of formal rationality. As I explained in this chapter, part of the legitimacy of the NOSB within the organic industry derives from its ability to represent a consensus of professionals from all sectors of the industry, not solely from its ability to create a foundation for formal rationality. Similarly, the consumer activism of Michael Pollan and others, which draws critiques of rationalization from the history of the organic industry, may help keep the attention of consumers on organic products and convince them that organic foods really do represent something other than more expensive versions of typical supermarket products. The strategy of stores such as Whole Foods Market to market organic foods as part of a shopping “experience” rather than simply as a product may match the substantive concerns of particular status groups of consumers (failure to connect with those status groups may have contributed to the failure of Wal-Mart’s organic program). In a true Weberian irony, the unpredictability of organic foods and their partial resistance to the rationalized practices and structures of the food industry may contribute to their current (and possibly future) market success.

The following chapter examines this puzzle by turning to another set of organizations in the natural and organic foods retail sector: natural foods co-ops. The co-ops emerged from the collectivist organizations and countercultural social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Their founders’ stated goal was to create participatory, community-based alternatives to the rationalized institutions of the mainstream food industry. However, in the current market, co-ops face pressures to emulate their mainstream retail competitors, who increasingly carry the same natural

and organic products as the co-ops. The coming chapter asks what leaders of co-ops have done to respond to this cultural contradiction.

CHAPTER 3:
CREATING ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES:
INDUSTRY CHANGE AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN
ORGANIC FOODS CO-OPS

As the previous chapter explained, the organic industry's growth has led to changes in the quality of the relationships between professionals within the industry and between the industry and consumers. While their influence is not absolute, models of rationalized organization have made significant inroads into the organic industry. The previous chapter examined the organic *mainstream*: the federal regulators and the retailing organizations with national scope. This chapter turns to a different set of organizations, whose members have self-consciously sought to create alternatives to the commercial mainstream. These natural and organic foods co-op stores (hereafter "co-ops") are member-owned and community-based retailers who sell mainly natural and organic foods. As small fish that increasingly swim with much larger breeds, the co-ops might seem to be in danger of imminent extinction. However, leaders of co-ops have not only achieved organizational survival, they have also maintained an identity for their stores as organizations that follow a different, more humanistic set of goals than their mainstream rivals. This chapter examines the social and cultural mechanisms that have guided the co-ops' responses to industry growth.

In order to identify these mechanisms, I begin with a brief review of the literature that synthesizes work by social movements scholars about collective identity with organizational researchers' work on inhabited institutions. I argue that this synthesis illuminates the challenge that co-op leaders face in the growing organic industry and also provides analytic tools to understand their responses to this challenge. Next, I use interview data and historical sources to identify and discuss mechanisms of symbolic realignment, loose coupling and bricolage in the development and operations of co-ops.

Collective Identity and Inhabited Institutions

Social movements scholars have defined collective identity as a cultural and social psychological mechanism that connects individuals to groups and transforms them into self-aware activists (Binder, 1999; Gamson, 1992; Jasper, 1997; Johnston et al., 1994; Melucci, 1996; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). More specifically, the collective identity of a social movement draws on tacit and explicit understandings among members about the boundaries of the movement's membership and the nature of its activities (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Collective identity does not only exist in the consciousness of individual movement participants but also in a shared framework of understandings, expressive symbols and public meanings (see Geertz, 1973). Researchers can gain purchase on these public meanings through interview data and also through examination of cultural artifacts produced for

consumption within the social movement, such as names, artworks, and editorials (Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

A key puzzle for social movements researchers who examine collective identity is how to reconcile the notion of a relatively stable shared identity with the dynamism and diversity that exist in most social movement settings. For example, scholars have examined the relationship between collective identity and difference within social movements. Melucci argues that social movements are “heterogeneous and fragmented phenomena, which internally contain a multitude of differentiated meanings, forms of action and modes of organization and which often consume a large part of their energies in the effort to bind such differences together” (Melucci, 1996, p. 13). In a related study of collective identity in lesbian feminist communities, Taylor and Whittier show that activists challenge dominant definitions of gender through specific behaviors, personal appearance and the choice of sexual partners. They also explain that this “negotiation” with hegemonic cultural meanings accentuates difference with lesbian feminist communities and creates tension between politically active lesbians and those who view lesbianism as a matter of personal choice and private life (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 120). More dramatically, Joshua Gamson argues that such disputes about the boundaries of collective identity in gay and lesbian communities and other recent social movements may cause these movements to “self-destruct” (Gamson, 1995, p. 390).

Although researchers have focused less attention on this area, the dynamism of collective identities also results from changes in the social and cultural context of

social movements which affect their fortunes in positive and negative ways. For example, movements may experience widespread support that leads to professionalization, they may see their claims institutionalized in formerly hostile organizations, or they may experience changes in their cultural and social contexts that disrupt organization (Binder, 2002; Gitlin, 1980; Katzenstein, 1998; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). All of these changes may alter the way that members of movement communities define boundaries, raise consciousness and negotiate alternative meanings (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Therefore, one of the questions that sociologists who use the concept of collective identity face is how to develop a framework to understand both continuity and change in the shared meanings that define movement participants and activities.

In this chapter, I examine the activities of natural foods co-ops in order to identify social mechanisms that connect collective identity formation to changes in social context (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Natural foods co-ops offer an excellent case for theory development in this area. These co-ops developed from the same politically progressive experiments in collectivist organization and challenges to established codes of meaning in the 1960s and 1970s that energized other “identity” movements (Breines, 1982; Melucci, 1996; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). The founders of co-ops viewed their work as a challenge to the dominance of large, profit-oriented corporations in the food industry and, more ambitiously, as a way to create a decentralized and egalitarian economy. One member of a natural foods co-op trade group explained to me, “kind of the national tag line for food co-ops, if you will, was

‘Food for people, not for profit’.” As this slogan suggests, co-op founders rejected the goals and practices of the conventional supermarket industry and worked to involve ordinary people in the decisions and operations of their stores. However, the growth and restructuring of the organic and natural foods industry has brought co-ops into close competition with the mainstream supermarkets that they claim to oppose. Leaders of co-ops face significant economic and cultural pressure to emulate the practices of these mainstream organizations in order to keep their organizations alive in the new market.

Market change has therefore produced a dilemma for the leaders of natural foods co-ops. This dilemma is not only one of economic survival – “How do we compete?” – but because of the co-ops’ opposition to mainstream stores, one of identity – “How do we compete without becoming our competition?” The problem results less from internal differences, which have comprised the primary focus of social movements researchers, than from changes in the co-ops’ organizational and cultural environment. In order to conceptualize co-op leaders’ responses to the dilemma in this chapter, I draw from work in organizations studies, which is a field of research that has closely examined the relationship between organizations and the broader social and cultural fields in which they exist (Dobbin, 1994; McAdam & Scott, 2005; Morrill, 2008; Scott, 2008). Specifically, I engage with the research approach known as “inhabited institutions,” which I discussed in Chapter 1. This literature, combined with work on collective identities, provides a useful framework for understanding how members of co-ops have responded to market growth.

The inhabited institutions approach grapples with the same questions of continuity and change that appear in the collective identity literature. Two of the architects of the approach define their project as a synthesis of neoinstitutionalism, which emphasizes the tendency of cultural structures to create homogeneity and isomorphism in organizations, and symbolic interactionism, which explains that organization and meaning “arise through social interaction” (see also Fine, 1984; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006, p. 215). One of the main goals of the inhabited institutions approach is to reconcile the tension between these perspectives by demonstrating that *both* broad cultural frameworks *and* interactions in local contexts shape organizational structure and culture.

The inhabited institutions approach also offers conceptual tools to make sense of the relationship between continuity and change in meanings and organizational environments. In a pair of articles, Hallett and Ventresca analyze Gouldner’s classic ethnography of the emergence of bureaucratic management at a gypsum mine and argue that the organizational mechanism of “loose coupling” enabled formal bureaucracy to co-exist with an earlier pattern of worker indulgency that had governed labor relations at the mine (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). The concept of loose coupling was introduced to the sociological literature by Meyer and Rowan and Weick several decades ago (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976). It describes a situation where “organizations incorporate elements proposed by broader cultural rules even as technical activities are largely unaffected” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006, p. 911). In the case of the gypsum mine, the company headquarters sent a new manager with a

mandate to implement a formal, punishment-centered style of bureaucratic management. The mine's workers, accustomed to thinking of themselves as independent craftsmen and as partners to the management, launched a strike in protest of the new rules. The workers and the management resolved this conflict, which could be understood as arising from a challenge to the collective identity of the workers, by compromising on a system of "mock bureaucracy" that had the trappings of formality but left compliance and enforcement of the rules up to the workers.

Binder pushes the inhabited institutions approach further with an ethnographic study of how an organization that offers supportive services to low-income clients has responded to changes in federal funding requirements (Binder, 2007). Her investigation of a group that she calls Parents' Community reveals that different subunits of the organization display different degrees of coupling between federal requirements, identities, and practice. In particular, her study shows that "staff in different departments are inventive and that their activity is not merely guided by broader rationalist and institutional scripts, but is created through local meaning systems as well" (Binder, 2007, p. 567). The importance of Binder's work is that it directs attention to the complexly-textured internal life of organizations and demonstrates that a single organization may respond to environmental changes in multiple ways.

In this chapter, I also "push further with inhabited institutions" by describing three organizational and cultural mechanisms that have shaped co-op leaders' response to the dilemma of market change: symbolic realignment, loose coupling, and

bricolage. Unlike Binder, I do not investigate variation in a single mechanism within an organization. Instead, I identify multiple, parallel mechanisms that operate within an community of organizations. The payoff of this approach is that it increases scholars' knowledge of the variety of practices that link institutions, identities and practices in organizational settings.

The first mechanism, symbolic realignment, is my own contribution to the inhabited institutions and collective identity literatures, although accounts of this process have been offered by cultural sociologists. Symbolic realignment describes a situation where a particular term, such as participation, shifts from denoting one practice or object to denoting a second, quite different, practice or object. For example, Sewell argues that symbolic realignment (although he does not use this term) occurred on a grand scale during the French Revolution with significant consequences. Specifically, Sewell claims that the storming of the Bastille marked an important moment in the Revolution because the term "the people," which had connoted simply common folk, suddenly came to signify the members of a sovereign nation (Sewell, 1996, p. 863). This not only changed the significance of the event but also restructured understandings of the relationships between groups in French society and set the stage for the abolition of feudal privilege. My much more modest discussion of symbolic realignment in this chapter focuses on the meaning of member participation. While early co-op leaders understood participation to mean physical labor in stores, co-op leaders have more recently redefined this term to include financial investments made

by members. Crucially, these investments are understood to have the same impact on the consciousness of members as did member labor.

Loose coupling, as I have explained, describes a situation in which organizational practices differ from formal representations of those practices. It is typically used in neoinstitutionalist research to analyze the limited influence of models of formally rational organization (such as bureaucracy) on the activities of personnel in specific organizations. In the case of co-ops, I found a different pattern. Rather than being loosely coupled to hierarchical, market-oriented models of organization, many co-op operations are instead loosely coupled to (but not decoupled from) models of participation that make up the movement's collective identity. Co-ops also offer several "ceremonies" of participation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As we will see, this is especially the case in areas related to store management and governance.

Finally, bricolage in organizational settings consists of a "recombination of elements that constitutes a new way of configuring organizations" (Campbell, 2005, p. 56).⁴⁹ In other words, bricolage means blending elements from different organizational models to create new, hybrid organizations. For co-op leaders, bricolage has involved selectively adopting forms of organization from the mainstream supermarket industry and fitting these elements into existing cultural and organizational patterns. The most important example of this process is the National Cooperative Grocers Association

⁴⁹ Organizations researchers borrowed this term from anthropology, where it has broader meaning, but describes a process of borrowing and combination that is essentially similar (Douglas, 1986; Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

(NCGA), a “virtual chain” of natural foods co-ops that managers and directors created in 2004.

Overall, this chapter makes several contributions to the literature on organizations and social movements. First, it reinforces the claim in the inhabited institutions literature that organizational change occurs through the encounter of field-level models of organization and local orders of meaning. It offers a new and potentially widespread mechanism to the inhabited institutions literature, symbolic realignment, while also empirically documenting mechanisms of loose coupling and bricolage. It also contributes to studies of collective identity by demonstrating that changes in the social context of movements affect the formation and maintenance of collective identities. More importantly, it shows that social movement scholars can productively import concepts from organizations studies to address questions in their own subfield and contributes to recent conversations between social movements and organizations scholars. Finally, this chapter offers an empirical account of a long-lasting social movement that is deeply meaningful to its members, but that has attracted the attention of few scholars. I now turn to the empirical data in order to discuss collective identity and the mechanisms of symbolic realignment, loose coupling and bricolage in co-ops.

Boundaries, consciousness, and co-op identity

As the informant that I quoted in the previous section explained, a common slogan amongst leaders of natural foods co-ops is “Food for people, not for profit.” But what does this slogan mean to the people who use it? Culturally, this slogan does two things. First, it establishes a boundary between the co-op movement and the mainstream supermarket industry. In the binary opposition created by this slogan, supermarkets are in the business of selling food in order to enrich corporate shareholders. Thus, they are unconcerned about whether the food that they sell is healthy for consumers, about whether their stores contribute positively to the communities in which they are located, and about whether the networks of food production and distribution that they rely on help or harm the environment. The slogan contrasts the profit-oriented activities of supermarkets with the people-oriented mission of the co-ops. Throughout my research, co-op leaders explained to me that their stores helped money stay in the local community, built social connections between farmers and consumers, educated consumers about health and environmental issues, and served as a community resource by hosting bands, art shows and meetings of local organizations. This slogan illuminates an important aspect of co-op identity: leaders of co-ops consider their stores to be humanistic organizations (in reference to the model I discussed in Chapter 1) and draw a boundary between them and the market-directed organizations that dominate the food industry.

The co-ops' slogan also suggests that co-op activity has a larger significance, which is what Taylor and Whittier referred to as the "consciousness" of a movement (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 114). Leaders of co-ops consider their stores to be participatory organizations and described member participation as a way to create economic democracy and citizen control over the food industry. These are overarching goals in the movement. Selling "food for people" implies that ordinary peoples' concerns should guide the food industry and leaders of co-ops offer their stores as a model for this sort of decentralized, democratic, and people-focused economy. In both a negative (boundaries) and a positive (consciousness) sense, the idea of people-focused participatory activity defines the identity of co-ops.⁵⁰

Three accounts of co-op origins from my interviews with co-op managers illustrate the importance of ideas of participation for the identity of co-ops. The first comes from the general manager of a co-op in Southern California. Currently, this store is one of the most economically successful co-ops in the country. Its annual sales top \$10 million dollars, which is especially impressive because the store carries no meat and only a few products that are not certified organic. At one point, the co-op had the most revenue per square foot of floor space of any co-op in the country, and the strength of its sales enabled it to acquire a loan to finance the construction of a new store that incorporated energy-saving technology, such as natural lighting and solar-

⁵⁰ The importance of peoples' needs and participation to co-op leaders does not mean that I believe that co-ops actually do a better job of serving the needs of all potential customers. In fact, issues of race and class have proved divisive in a number of co-ops (Cox, 1994). This is a deeply problematic issue that I will return to in Chapter 5.

generated electricity. However, the general manager's account of the store's origins emphasizes collective action, including business success only as an afterthought:

It actually started as a small buying club in the seventies. There was one supermarket ... [and] there was redlining, which means like in real estate, there is a different price table for poorer areas. Higher pricing. And those were the days in which there was a lot of activism and people were taking a great deal of interest in the social structures of the time. So a group of people got together and ... went down to the markets and brought back cases of things and distributed that at a park bench. Pretty soon they had enough people that they could afford to move into somebody's garage and from there they moved into the house. From there the store just kept thriving.⁵¹

This manager describes the origins of the co-op as a community reaction against unjust economic practices, such as charging poor people higher prices for food. She points out that it arose not as a business venture, but as part of a broader questioning and criticism of entrenched social structures. She also emphasizes that the founders of the co-op collectively challenged the dominance of supermarkets: they got together as a group and visited food wholesale markets, which are usually frequented only by grocery and restaurant buyers, purchased the items that they needed, and distributed the items at a neighborhood location. The success of this alternative, participatory food channel led more people to join the group, which she does not call a store until the very end. In this story, co-op creation was not only about building a commercial organization. It was also about building community solidarity and self-determination and gaining a degree of freedom from the supermarket industry.

The second account comes from the manager of a much smaller co-op in Michigan. She has worked at this co-op since the early 1970s and has experienced its

⁵¹ Interview, October 10, 2005.

commercial successes and failures. Since the co-op's founding, the town has suffered economically from the departure of the auto industry, which has hurt the co-op's sales. The co-op draws both customers and employees from a nearby state university campus, but the manager jokes that she cannot rely too much on this campus because it "is probably one of the least alternative minded universities in the country." In the 1990s, the co-op came close to bankruptcy after a major natural foods chain opened a store in a more affluent city a few miles away. The co-op survived by issuing a personal appeal to its members, but the manager is now worried about the decision of the local Wal-Mart to increase the number of organic foods it sells. In spite of these differences, this manager's account of the origin of her store is similar to the one provided by her more economically successful colleague.

Co-ops were really, I saw them as more of, I mean they were definitely a natural foods store but they were different than the other natural foods stores that were in town, which were more like health food stores ... whereas the co-op was trying to get good food. If they couldn't get whole grain flour they would work with farmers to get those farmers to raise wheat that could be made into whole wheat flour instead of sent through the big ag biz and made into white flour. I think that at the very beginning co-ops were very much grassroots, trying to change the food sources by working together ... Over time, I think that co-ops and people in co-ops really had a major force in changing farmers to start growing things organically.⁵²

Like the California manager's story, this account emphasizes the theme of grassroots resistance to established economic institutions and presents the co-op as a force for social and cultural change. The second manager contrasts her co-op's efforts to "change the food sources by working together" with farmers to the commercial

⁵² Interview, August 16, 2006.

priorities of the “big ag biz.” Like independent natural foods stores, the co-op sought to increase consumers’ access to healthy foods like whole grains (rather than the nutritionally-poor refined products offered by mainstream companies) and organics; however, co-ops differed from natural foods stores in their “grassroots” campaign to convert farmers to organic production. She also argues that as a movement of empowered citizens, “co-ops really had a major force in changing farmers to start growing things organically.”

The third account comes from the manager and co-founder of a thirty-five-year-old co-op in New York. In part because this co-op is located in a large urban area, it has access to a large number of customers who want to buy natural and organic foods. In fact, this co-op only allows official members to shop in its store and recently considered capping its membership so as not to overtax that store’s workers and infrastructure. This manager emphasized the egalitarianism and participation in his story of the store’s origins:

I was twenty three years old when one of my roommates came home and said that he had heard that there was a group of people who were going to start to meet the following week to try and start a co-op. So we both thought that was a great idea and went to the meeting. That’s kind of how it got started. That group of people worked together for about five months and figured out what kind of co-op we wanted to start. We decided on our plan of action and had at least one meeting a week. Each week we came back and reported on the tasks that we had accomplished and we were able to open in about five months ... We were definitely democratically run. Of course, we had meetings and our democracy would come from meetings that everybody would be invited to. We were very sophisticated in some ways but in other ways we were extremely unsophisticated. So we didn’t think out, well, are

there different forms of democracy? Which democracy are we? We didn't ask that question.⁵³

This co-op leader's account describes the collective work involved in starting the co-op in detail. Like the other managers, he emphasizes the grassroots character of the store's origins: he describes the store's founders as an ordinary "group of people" motivated by a "great idea." By meeting regularly and working together, they launched the co-op without financial assistance or control from other organizations. In addition, they used the meetings to collectively determine "what kind of co-op" they wanted. The manager emphasizes that democratic relationships between the store and its members were very important and that from the beginning the store organized open meetings to facilitate democratic decision-making. He notes that in some ways, the democratic and participatory aspirations of the founders outstripped their ability to put these aspirations into practice. However, he explains that the challenges that the founders encountered led them to ask questions about how to create more sophisticated procedures to sustain democracy and participation in the organization.

These origin stories signal the importance of participation in co-op leaders' understanding of their organizations. They all explain that natural foods co-ops emerged from collective, grassroots, community-based efforts to create alternatives to the mainstream food industry. For all of these co-ops, part of the alternative was that they provided a greater selection of natural and

⁵³ Interview, September 11, 2007.

organic foods than mainstream stores. However, the co-ops' ability to do this was closely connected to the broader project of economic democracy, or enabling ordinary people to influence the sorts of food products available to them. For example, members of co-ops explained that their organizations succeeded because they mobilized customers and employees to improve their communities and change the food supply. In contrast, they said, mainstream stores pursued gains for their owners and for distant investors while selling unhealthy and environmentally destructive food. For the leaders of co-ops, participation is the key factor that separates their organizations from mainstream stores.

Symbolic realignment: From collective labor to shared ownership

One way that co-ops seek to create participatory organizations is by encouraging members to work together for collective gain. Although the idea of working together appears throughout the history of the co-op movement, its significance has changed over time. Examining this shift reveals the mechanism of symbolic realignment in co-ops.

For emerging food co-ops in the 1970s, working together meant *direct member labor* as a technique for increasing community organization and democratic control over the food system. Early co-ops frequently relied on the volunteer or nominally compensated labor of members to perform unskilled store work, such as sweeping

floors, ringing up sales, stocking products and slicing cheese. On one hand, member participation was clearly a matter of economic necessity for co-ops. Relying on members, rather than paid employees, to do such minimally skilled work helped the early co-ops lower costs and stay in business. However, co-op leaders also described member labor in stores as a means to achieve broader goals. For example, an editorial by one co-op manager in *Cooperative Grocer*, a trade magazine for natural foods co-ops, explained that member labor formed part of a philosophy that had guided his store from its origins. His store relied on work to foster “cooperative values” among its members.

Working helps strengthen the connection one feels. The feeling of ownership one gets from working cooperatively far exceeds that felt from only a monetary equity investment. Working usually will put members much more in touch with cooperative values and principles. When people join for savings and years later no longer really need the savings, they tend to remain members because they feel connected. They realize that cooperative values and principles are important to them ... People are less likely after awhile to think of the co-op as an entity outside of themselves that they are making a deal with. They are less likely to evaluate their work contribution in dollars and cents. (Holtz, 2003)

The argument made by this co-op manager is not simply that working members are more loyal patrons than non working members, although co-op leaders did make this claim. Instead, he suggested that work in co-ops advanced the goal of cultural change by giving members direct experience with “co-operative values and principles.” By showing members the relevance of these principles in everyday life, this co-op leader presented member work as part of a broader mission of personal and cultural transformation.

Leaders of co-ops also designed member labor systems to help people learn how to “work together.” Not infrequently, this goal involved significant efforts on the part of co-op managers or costs to the co-op. One manager explained:

We wanted our member work system to help foster more of a sense of community among our members, but because most members worked at completely random times, they seldom worked with the same person twice ... We set up scheduled work teams with an incentive for participation (an extra hour’s credit for a two-hour work shift at a regularly scheduled time and job). Work teams bring the same group of people together every six weeks to, say, cut cheese, and encourage members to get to know each other. (Barry, 1987)

In order to create a system of member labor that created social bonds and a sense of mutual responsibility and cooperation among the store’s members, the managers of this co-op took on the burden of scheduling coordinated shifts for workers and also provided an extra incentive for members to participate in these shifts. It is telling that this manager did not justify the system by explaining that it increased the efficiency and reliability of working members, although it may well have done so. Instead, he explains that it “encourage[d] members to get to know each other” and “foster[ed] more of a sense of community.”

Co-op member labor programs occasionally created legal troubles for these organizations. One co-op manager told me that in the early 1990s, her store was required by the U.S. Department of Labor to stop allowing members to work on the sales floor. According this agency, the practice of member labor was anti-competitive because it enabled the co-op to pay less than minimum wage for core business tasks. In response, her co-op organized a community volunteer program that placed members in local schools and non-profit organizations. As an incentive, the co-op offered an

18% discount on one shopping trip for each hour worked by a volunteer. The leaders of this co-op valued the cultural significance of “working together” so much that they not only took on the organizational burden of co-ordinating a volunteer program, they also accepted significant cuts in sales revenues in order to encourage people to work.

As the natural and organic foods industry has grown and become more competitive, however, many co-op leaders have found it difficult to incorporate member labor in their stores. In the first place, working members tend to be less reliable and less well trained than professional store staff. This posed a dilemma for members of natural foods co-ops that sought to create alternatives to mainstream retailers and deliver not just economic returns, but also democratic outcomes, to their members. One way that co-op leaders have responded to this dilemma is by reinterpreting the meaning of “working together.”

First, some co-op leaders made the case that relying on members to work in stores not only hurt co-ops economically, it impeded their ability to create lasting changes in the food industry. In a 1987 contribution to an “Exchange on the Fate of Food Co-ops,” for example, the editor of *Cooperative Grocer* offered a critique of co-op operations.

Many food cooperatives thought that the strength of their social agenda – their desires for quality food and community – would allow them to substitute sweat equity for capital equity, widespread member participation for business acumen, and a readymade market (a static or passive approach) for a dynamic marketing strategy ... The results were and are a continuing liability for our movement: widely scattered independent retail and preorder co-operatives, weakly linked to a common wholesale and with an endless variety of methods and systems for bookkeeping, advertising, membership, merchandising, management, etc. ... To state what seems obvious but still bears

repeating: Sound business practices are an essential part of an active, effective movement for social change. (Gutknecht, 1987)

The editor targeted the practice of member labor in his effort to integrate “sound business practices” into the co-op world. For example, several early issues of *Cooperative Grocer* ran a series of articles on working members. The series included contributions from members of co-ops that used working member systems, but the editorials pointed out that member labor systems had the unintended consequence of creating antagonism and unequal treatment between groups of co-op members and co-op staff. One editorial argued:

Most members and potential members haven't the time or interest to schedule a weekly or monthly stint at the co-op. These people pay, through the pricing and discount structure, for the member labor program; and if the program involves in-store work, it results in less than professional service. In some co-ops, working conditions for a relative few appear to take priority over shopping conditions for most. And the staff pays for such programs at least twice: by the training, supervision and corrective work that in-store member labor requires; and because staff wages are actively depressed by diverting a chunk of labor expenses away from paying those who are on the job every day. In some co-ops, 'volunteers' earn as much in discounts per hour of work as do the store professional staff. (Gutknecht, 1991)

Here, the editor described member labor as unfair and unequal, which were terms that members of co-ops often applied to the conventional supermarkets that they opposed. For example, he suggested that the majority of co-op members were forced to “pay” for the minority that worked through higher prices, depressed wages, additional work and unpleasant “shopping conditions.” He also emphasized that the benefits of such member labor programs accrue to a “relative few” while undermining the commitments and relationships of most members to the co-op.

Second, members of co-ops offered a redefinition of the notion of “working together” that emphasized financial contributions and shared ownership rather than direct participation. For example, one co-op member wrote in *Cooperative Grocer*:

A cooperative is a cooperative because it is owned by the people who use it. At this stage in advanced capitalism, the fact that cooperatives provide a viable method for the decentralization of capital and profit is extraordinary and worth protecting. The very fact that our cooperatives are capable of putting business ownership in the hands of thousands of people is a tremendously important social goal. (Singerman, 1987)

This co-op member argued that shared business ownership was the “important social goal” that co-ops sought to achieve and would advance the movement’s overall objective of economic democracy. For her, collective ownership, not collective work, distinguishes co-ops from mainstream American business models.

Member investment and ownership fit more easily than collective labor into the changing business environment. However, some co-op members expressed ambivalence towards member investment in co-ops in addition to or as an alternative to labor. These co-op members argued that financial contributions alone could not forge the sorts of ties between people that co-ops were meant to create. “Certainly some kind of monetary investment also helps create a feeling of ownership and sense of identity,” one co-op manager explained, “but it would be hard to come up with examples where investing in something leads to the same kind of identification that expending time and effort in a social setting does” (Barry, 1987). While investment might help co-ops financially, it would not advance their transformative mission.

In response to these concerns, the editor of *Cooperative Grocer* argued that member ownership through investment in the co-op could connect people more

effectively than physical work in co-ops by countering the isolating, selfish tendencies of American commercial culture. He explained that collective ownership and investment, which he termed “social capital ... is a philosophical foundation of co-operatives and a kind of ultimate realization of our efforts” and that it embodied the qualities of sacrifice and intimacy that created “deep” community relationships (Gutknecht, 1997b). On the theme of sacrifice, he criticized demands by members that co-ops simply break even and return any net income to members in the form of discounts and dividend checks, which “are practices that handicap the co-op’s ability to serve member needs in the future” (Gutknecht, 1997a). He argued that member investment and collective ownership preserved the intimacy of shared labor, although in another form:

Social capital more broadly equates to a common community resource that is built or maintained, something “owned” together that improves our lives, embodied in public spaces and institutions and in the natural environment ... The very recognition of our common lot contradicts the private market’s drive to atomize the consumer and subvert all relations except that of the individual in the market. (Gutknecht, 1997a)

The editor here used language that parallels the words used by other co-op members to talk about the virtues of member labor. He explained that investment in a common resource, such as a co-op, brings people together into a “community” based on collective ownership and common gain. He argued that investment also helps co-op members recognize their “common lot” and internalize the value of cooperation, which is very similar to language that managers used to talk about the effects of labor at an earlier time. While participation in co-ops once meant direct, physical work in

cooperation with others, for the editor of this magazine, the symbol had been realigned to mean investment in the form of an annual payment, instead.

Realigning the meaning of participation is one way that leaders of co-ops have responded to the simultaneous challenges of competition and identity in the changing organic foods industry. However, it is important to note that this strategy is not without its problems. One of these problems is that not all co-op leaders agree to this change in the meaning of participation. As I pointed out above, several co-op leaders expressed doubts about whether investment was as effective as member labor in creating community and instilling cooperative values in members. One of these leaders, whose co-op still requires members to commit to working regular shifts every four weeks, explained to me in an interview

Our co-op I think now has on average a higher connection feeling among its members. If you came here and interviewed people and you went to the Cleveland co-op, which I have never been to but is probably a lovely place, or if you went to the Harvest Co-op in Boston or the Davis Co-op in California and you interviewed people there, my guess is that if you interviewed a hundred people in each store and you had some way of quantifying the apparent connection that people felt to the co-op, it would be higher here.⁵⁴

One member of this co-op that I spoke with while conducting observation agreed and explained that in her opinion, the store's member labor program erases differences between co-op members and the organization itself. She offered a parable: one day while standing in a long, slow line to purchase her groceries, she saw a man leave his place in line and move to the front. She was dismayed and thought that he was "taking advantage of the organization," but instead of returning to the line, he went to a cash

⁵⁴ Interview, September 11, 2007.

register and started ringing up the purchases of other customers. Because he could so easily shift from the role of a shopper to that of a worker, he was able to solve the problem of the long line that was bothering the other members. However, Gutknecht, the editor of *Cooperative Grocer*, criticized this co-op's member labor system, explaining that it could only be sustained because of the co-op's location in a large urban area that provided an abundance of members who were willing to work.

A second problem is that while co-op leaders argue that the practice of member investment and its associated social and cultural benefits distinguishes them from mainstream grocery stores, it ironically makes them seem similar to a category of organizations that they view as very different. These are warehouse clubs, such as Sam's Club and Costco, which charge customers a membership fee to shop for discounted merchandise. One business services organization for natural foods cooperatives explains the difference between these organizations on its website:

Consumer cooperatives are very different from privately owned "discount clubs," which charge annual fees in exchange for a discount on purchases. The "club" is not owned or governed by the members and the profits of the business go to the investors, not to members. In a cooperative, the members own the business and the profits belong to the community of members ... The overall goal of the cooperative movement is to create organizations that serve the needs of the people who use them.⁵⁵

This explanation, as well as several interviews that I conducted with co-op managers, attests that some co-op members are confused about the purpose of their annual investments and about what co-op leaders believe makes their organizations unique.

⁵⁵ <http://www.ncga.coop/about/coops>

Loose coupling: Co-op management and governance

Co-op leaders also sought to place a significant amount of control over store decisions in the hands of members in order to create participatory organizations. They began by tightly coupling member opinions and participation to store governance. However, leaders of co-ops have adapted to changes in the organizational environment by gradually decoupling these two things from store governance in various ways. In many areas of business operations, member participation is ceremonial and the majority of actual control lies with professional managers.

In the early years, many co-ops encouraged their members to participate in store operations and decision-making. One member of a vegetarian food co-op that I interviewed offered this account of how the store had made decisions about merchandise in the “old days”.

We basically had meetings once a month on Sunday night to discuss store policy. The weird part about that was, let's take eggs. Eggs are always a questionable issue for vegetarians because some vegetarians don't consider eggs flesh so they consider it within reason to eat eggs. So you'd get a bunch of people who didn't want to have eggs in the store, so they would get together all of their friends on that Sunday and they would vote out eggs. And then the next Sunday, somebody that wanted to have eggs in the store, they would bring all their friends and they would vote to have eggs back in the store.⁵⁶

According to this member, co-op governance was a participatory affair. However, participatory governance created several dilemmas as co-ops grew in size and faced stiffer competition from other stores in their environments. This member went on to

⁵⁶ Interview, May 29, 2006.

explain that collective, participatory decision-making created a “very inconsistent base, at least for the business world, of products going in and out.” This meant that customers could not be certain of finding the products that they wanted to buy from one trip to the co-op to the next. In turn, this created fluctuations and uncertainty in co-ops’ cash flow and financial standing. To be sure, some members of co-ops argued that customers’ immediate needs were less important than long-term “political” support for co-ops as a means to social change (Zwerdling, 1979). As natural and organic products became more available in non-co-operative retail stores, though, co-op leaders found that this strategy was not enough to ensure organizational survival.

Leaders of co-ops also explained that collective management created “free rider” problems when certain members skipped meetings or avoided responsibilities while benefiting from the work of others to maintain the store. Organizational arrangements that distributed management responsibilities across the members of the co-op lacked mechanisms to reward dependable participants and exclude those that did not contribute. In some co-ops, this created interpersonal tensions among members.

One manager recalled that,

everyone who worked in the store was encouraged to participate in the management, but that was not really how it worked, and I think that was what led to the decision to be a co-op, that there were people who were taking more responsibility than others and that generated some hard feelings.⁵⁷

The store’s decision to implement a formal co-op model with professional management and a clear chain of command resolved these problems, she explained.

⁵⁷ Interview, October 10, 2005.

Finally, co-ops became more complex organizations as they grew in size and surpassed the capabilities of non-professional managers. Stores managed by participation generally took longer to reach decisions about operations, which hampered stores' ability to respond to changing environmental conditions. One co-op manager with experience in participatory governance explained, "it is kind of a joke in a lot of co-ops, like, oh, it's co-op time, everything takes forever and you're going to talk about business until you're dead." Ordinary members also had a difficult time providing appropriate oversight for the business. According to a different manager who had worked in one co-op since the early 1970s, her store's early participatory governance structure was

a little bit absurd ... We all decided what to order together. One person couldn't make those decisions and that was difficult. That was one reason we went over to a general manager system, that it was too time consuming what we were doing and we didn't have anyone watching overall from day to day. You could watch what was happening on your day but what carried over to the next day wasn't very well, that information wasn't transferred very well. And then there was no long term picture of anything because everybody was just there for their day to day thing.⁵⁸

This manager explained that participatory governance created a chaotic form of store management that lacked oversight and focused only on short-term goals.

During the 1990s, most co-ops worked to resolve these problems by gradually shifting responsibility for business planning and decisions to professional store managers and salaried staff. Co-ops retained some elements of participatory governance structures but did not connect these elements tightly with store operations

⁵⁸ Interview, August 16, 2006.

and decision-making. In some cases, these vestiges of the past were purely “ceremonial” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). At a small co-op in Michigan, for example, all staff members had the job title “co-coordinator” (as opposed to checkout clerk, stocker, or other specific job functions). The store’s manager explained that these titles derived from an earlier period in the co-op’s history.

We call them co-coordinators which came back from the days before there was a manager and we were co-managed. Instead of calling it co-managers because there was that anti-management attitude out there, we were called co-coordinators because we were all part of running the day to day stuff. Ordering or whatever needed to happen was done as a group and so we kept the co-coordinator thing even when we started having a manager because it kind of makes sense. We don’t just have cashiers standing at the register all day. That person is part of customer service, stocking, pricing, ordering, cleaning, doing produce, whatever needs to be done during their shift they are still doing it so they are still coordinating.⁵⁹

The title “co-coordinator” designated an egalitarian, participatory relationship among co-op members in the early days of the store. It no longer fits the store in this sense because the general manager is responsible for hiring, supervising and firing other workers, who are frequently students at the local university campus seeking temporary jobs. However, she explains that the title still fits the technical features of the jobs that workers do because everybody does a bit of everything. The title establishes a connection to the store’s past and to its identity as a participatory organization, although this connection is mostly ceremonial and the workers have little formal authority within the store.

Loose coupling between organizational structures that involve co-op members

⁵⁹ Interview, August 16, 2006.

in store operations and actual management decisions also appears in co-op boards of directors. A participatory organizational aspect that has endured from the past in most co-ops, boards of directors are comprised of non-employees (and occasionally employees) elected by the co-op's membership to serve a term of a defined length. Directors represent the interests of co-op members and form, at least on paper, the ultimate authority in co-ops. In practice, directors play a more limited role in the operational decisions of co-ops. While directors have the responsibility to hire and, if necessary, fire general managers, they usually rely on the managers to administer the store. For example, many co-ops have implemented a model of board management called "policy governance" from the non-profit world. The "PoGo" model enables boards to establish objectives for the store and place boundaries on the store's activities, but restricts the board's role in specific decisions. The manager of a successful, multi-store co-op explained how policy governance works in his organization:

As related to the board's relationship with the general manager, there are two sets of written policies. The first is called ends policies. Ends policies are supposed to tell the general manager what difference is this organization going to make in the world, who's it going to make this difference for, and at what cost. So, what, for whom, at what costs. Kind of the long term goals. What results will be produced? How will the world be different as a result of us being here? ... The general manager is free to use any means he or she deems appropriate to achieve those results except these other group of policies called executive limitations. Executive limitation policies. And these are the things that the board has said you cannot do. So they are all written in the negative: the general manager shall not, the general manager may not, the general manager shall not allow. So you've got the ends policies, go out and do anything, use all your creativity, use all the resources of this organization to achieve these goals except this list of things that we have said you can't do. At least at [this store] that is the

extent of it. That's really how it is. So I get to go out and do anything that I want to achieve these goals as long as I avoid the negatives that they have outlined.⁶⁰

According to this manager, the co-op's board establishes the organization's "long-term goals" and a set of prohibited activities, but within these boundaries the manager is encouraged to "use all your creativity" and allowed to make executive decisions more or less autonomously. Goals and limitations are also stated in a fairly open-ended way. For example, one co-op's Global Ends Policy proposes the objective of creating "a thriving member-owned cooperative that results in an increasing number of people having and making more informed and sustainable choices at costs that do not exceed the revenues of the cooperative" (www.lamontanita.coop).

It is important to note that not all of the co-ops I investigated used identical systems of board management. However, a significant degree of loose coupling and ceremonial activity existed in all of the cases that I uncovered. For example, at a co-op where I observed boards of directors meetings over the course of a year, the manager regularly brought decisions about large expenses to the board for approval. Some of these decisions included the purchase of new equipment and software, optional payments on the store's bank loan, and donations to community groups and activist organizations that worked to restrict genetically modified crops. The board granted or denied approval for these expenses through a majority vote. Although this suggests that the board at this co-op exercises more direct control over co-op operations than boards that use the policy governance model, the general manager and her staff made

⁶⁰ Interview, February 20, 2007.

most of the day-to-day decisions involved in running the store (such as decisions related to purchasing merchandise, scheduling staff, marketing, budgeting, hiring and firing, and long-term planning) without the board's direct oversight.

Board meetings at this co-op also included ceremonial activities. One such activity was called "reading the financials." During each month's board meeting, the chair of the board's finance committee, a store employee, distributed and discussed a report of the co-op's finances with the entire board. Generally, these reports consisted of ten to twelve page, small-font spreadsheets which presented the co-op's income, expenses and financial indicators across a wide variety of categories. The spreadsheets also compared the co-op's financial performance during previous month to the month before that and to the same month in the previous year. As a participant with a fairly large amount of education but without specific training in accountancy, I found these financial reports virtually incomprehensible. The other members of the board, most of whom also lacked business training and experience beyond their elected position at the co-op, generally did not question the financial committee chair's presentation. When they did ask questions, these mainly were requests for clarification about the meaning of a particular indicator or figure. Although it is doubtful that most board members understood the nuances of the financial reports as well as the committee chair and the general manager, "reading the financials" helped to define the co-op as a participatory organization where members have access to and authority over the store's operations.

The co-ops that I investigated sponsored additional efforts that involved members and were loosely coupled to store operations. In one of the co-ops described

above, suggestion boxes are placed in the store for members to leave comments or suggestions in while they shop. A selection of these suggestions appear in the co-op's monthly newsletter, which all members receive for free. Co-op staff respond in detail to each comment but not all of these suggestions result in changes in the co-op's policies or activities. Another example of loose coupling appears in a different co-op. Here, the membership coordinator explained that her store had just organized a "World Cafe" for its members to meet one another and develop ideas about the future direction of the store. As she described the event:

We had about forty-five people there. We got in groups of nine after dinner and had three questions. Where do you think the co-op should be in thirty years? What do we have to think about now to get there? What do we have to learn? Three rounds of discussion to flesh out what our, sort of this forty five member focus group, where they want us to go. And it is a format we'll use probably once or twice a year from now on because it was really fun, really successful, really community building, and a lot of really fun ideas came out of it.⁶¹

Once again, she did not say that the co-op planned to act on all of the ideas, which included "everything from group health insurance, co-housing, biodiesel stations ... [to] a program where co-op members can invest in real estate and farm land and stuff like that." On the other hand, she felt that part of the co-op's purpose was to involve members in discussions about the organization's future.

Although loose coupling and ceremonies of participation are common in areas related to member participation in store governance, loose coupling is not decoupling. In other words, member participation in co-ops does actually limit the authority of professional managers to a certain degree, even though managers have control over

⁶¹ Interview, March 12, 2007.

most of the store's day to day operations. In addition to the examples that I described above, co-ops' identity as participatory organizations creates expectations for managers in co-ops that are different from expectations for managers in conventional supermarkets. For example, one co-op director that I interviewed explained that the co-op culture of participation had made it impossible to hire a manager from the mainstream supermarket industry.

We lost the general manager ... and we brought in somebody else. He didn't work out. He had good background for being in retail sales. He came from a family that owned grocery stores. But he was used to being a store manager in which he just said what he wanted to do and he didn't quite understand that in a co-op you don't just say what you want to do. Part of being in a co-op is that people get to voice their opinions. So it was a lot of friction in between him and employees.⁶²

In spite of the manager's track record in retail sales and knowledge of the grocery business, he was not able to fit into the co-op because he refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the culture of participation and could not adapt to the demands of the co-op staff that their opinions be taken into account.

Similarly, the manager of a different co-op contrasted his role and responsibilities with those of a mainstream supermarket manager.

We are able to take a longer view focus here than my peers on the conventional side who are gonna be much more quarter-to-quarter income driven, particularly in publicly traded firms where every quarter's published results can severely impact the officer's net income and the officer's compensation ... [and] success is almost purely defined as financial success. That is not the case at cooperatives, where financial success is certainly part of what we have to deliver, but we are also expected to deliver, and I will just tick off a few things, a living wage to staff members, high levels of benefits, exceptional staff treatment policies and practices, what some members of my board like

⁶² Interview, May 29, 2006.

to call “participatory management.” Systems in place so it is not such a top down thing and people get to participate at various levels of management and everything is not just driven down through the, as opposed to a Trader Joe’s, for example, everything is just crafted out of headquarters and the store staff ends up being in many cases nothing more than walking around with a clipboard, just executing the strategy and the plan that has been developed from on high.⁶³

These two examples clearly show that the co-ops’ collective identity as participatory organizations influences the responsibilities of store managers and even their understanding of their jobs and their professional identities. Crucially, this manager identifies his work not only as ensuring the co-op’s financial success, but also as creating opportunities for the store’s staff and members to participate in the store’s operations. In contrast to such participatory systems, he claims that staff in mainstream supermarkets simply execute operational decisions made by distant owners and corporate managers.

Bricolage: Local autonomy, collective competition, and the National Cooperative Grocer’s Association

In the field of co-ops, the process of bricolage has enabled organizations to selectively adopt organizational forms from the mainstream supermarket industry and fit these elements into existing cultural and organizational patterns. The most important example of this process is the National Cooperative Grocers’ Association (NCGA), a “virtual chain” of natural foods co-ops that managers and directors formed

⁶³ Interview, February 20, 2007.

in 2004.

The NCGA developed from co-ops' efforts to respond to the competitive disadvantage created by the history of the co-op movement. During the 1970s and 1980s, natural foods co-ops formed a loosely affiliated population of stores that encompassed a wide variety of practices and store formats and sold a gamut of different product assortments. This loose structure resulted from the local origin of most co-ops, which relied on the efforts and patronage of members of the immediate community to survive. At most, co-ops organized on a regional level as entrepreneurial founders circulated among organizations in a particular city or state (Cox, 1994). The stores were also connected by co-operative distribution warehouses, which sometimes formed the hub of a population of co-operative retail stores. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, one early hot spot of food co-op organization, co-op members formed People's Warehouse, which, after a bout of internal contention and an attempted leadership coup, changed its name to the Distributing Alliance of Northcountry Cooperatives (Cox, 1994). Other important distributors sprang up in different parts of the country, such as Blooming Prairie Warehouse in Iowa and Northeast Cooperatives in Vermont.

This arrangement suited the needs of early co-ops for a reliable supply of natural and organic products. It also enabled members of retail co-ops to deal with distributors who shared a belief in the value of working together and an understanding of the participatory forms of management that existed in many co-ops at that time. In comparison to mainstream grocery stores, though, the regional organization of co-ops

was remarkably inefficient. National grocery retailers had built chains of stores in order to benefit from economies of scale in purchasing. Because of their large size and homogeneity of product lines across stores, these chain retailers achieved a degree of predictability that enabled them to realize discounts on merchandise by placing large orders in advance. Along the same lines, the largest retailers were able to leverage market power to gain additional discounts on orders to distributors. On the distribution side of the industry, national consolidation enabled distributors to obtain similar discounts from producers. For these chain retailers, efficiency was synonymous with size because the largest retail and distribution chains were the most able to drive costs out of the procurement of merchandise.

As the organic and natural foods industry grew in the 1990s, co-operative retailers and distributors faced the encroachment of the chain model. Chains made the greatest inroads in the distribution sector. The number of regional co-operative distributors dwindled from twenty-eight in 1982 to three in 2003, mainly through the efforts of single company, United Natural Foods, Inc. (UNFI). UNFI grew from an independent (non-cooperative) regional distributor to a national public company primarily by acquiring existing regional independent and cooperative distributors and by offering services to retailers at prices that other distributors could not match. Because of its size, UNFI was also able to provide services to national natural foods retail chains, which grew in the 1990s, and to conventional supermarkets as they expanded lines of natural and organic foods. Reflecting on the sale of the largest co-operative distributor, Blooming Prairie, to UNFI in 2002, the editor of *Cooperative*

Grocer explained that the distributor's small size made it vulnerable in spite of its strong sales performance. He concluded that "in proposing to sell while Blooming Prairie is strong and profitable, the board addressed their foremost responsibility: protecting members' investments. They pursued for years, without results, mergers that would have preserved co-op investments and services. Though hard to swallow, proposing to sell before a probable decline took foresight and courage" (Gutknecht, 2002).

The consolidation of natural foods distribution and the growth of natural foods retail chains exposed similar problems with the locally-focused organization of co-operative retailers. Local co-ops placed smaller product orders with UNFI and, as a result, paid relatively high prices per unit of merchandise. Their position as small players in a growing market gave them very little economic leverage, and, with the decline of co-operative distributors, they also lost the ability to leverage a shared sense of mission and identity to achieve favorable terms. At the same time, natural foods chain retailers created stores in the home markets of many co-ops and offered co-op customers the same products for prices that were sometimes significantly lower. Michael Funk, the founder of UNFI, offered the leaders of co-op retail stores one version of their future at a trade conference in 2003. Arguing that co-ops needed an "Attila the Hun" leader to overcome differences between stores, Funk suggested,

You have to give up your individual store preferences and combine to create a national force: one that has buying power; one that can attract capital; one that can attract top quality management ... My wish would be that you would be able to have a chain of medium size stores, that are able to serve the smaller communities around the country as well as operate in the large metro areas. A chain of stores under one banner and

one management team, which represents the history of what got us here, promoting the best of what this industry represents in health and sustainability. A powerful buying unit, taking advantage of national purchasing power while maintaining regional marketing strategies. A chain that spreads its expertise and best practices to ensure a consistently well-run store in every community across the country. A chain that is strong enough financially to expand when needed and attract future capital as required. (Funk, 2003)

In essence, Funk recommended that co-ops abandon most of their local autonomy for a model of organization quite similar to that of the mainstream natural foods chains.

Funk's proposal made economic sense, but it also ran counter to the way that many co-op leaders understood their organizations. Funk's model of a centrally-managed chain of co-ops would reduce the ability of individual stores to make decisions about product lines, membership programs, and community outreach. In contrast, many co-op leaders believed that such responsiveness created an important connection between stores and their local communities. One co-op membership coordinator explained this outlook:

I just think that co-ops are at all different levels. It is not a homogenous group. They are different in size, they are different in outlook. Some sell conventional food and some don't. Some sell Coca-Cola and some boycott Coke. I mean, co-ops, you just can't, they are not all stamped with the same cookie cutter. There is great variety and that is part of its both charm and vigor. Every co-op responds to the needs of its community, I think. The successful co-ops. The ones that don't respond to the community go under and the ones that do survive and really thrive in their community.⁶⁴

Her support of diversity and local autonomy resonated with the broader co-op community. At the end of the conference in which Funk offered his proposal, a group of co-op managers staged an unanticipated, mock "takeover" of the event. Parading

⁶⁴ Interview, March 12, 2007.

into the conference hall, they chanted a satirical rejection of Funk's recommendation: "Funky Dumpty stood in the hall, Funky Dumpty, Attila and all. But all of that Wall Street and all of that talk can't stop our co-ops from walking our walk!" (Gutknecht, 2003).

On a more serious note, the leaders of many co-ops recognized the competitive threat posed by natural foods grocery chains and the inability of individual stores to effectively respond to the challenge. During the 1990s, co-ops formed a set of regional purchasing associations in order to leverage collective market power and obtain lower prices from distributors. In 2004, these regional associations voted to transfer their assets and membership to a newly-formed National Cooperative Grocers' Association (NCGA). This association served several purposes beyond those offered by the regional associations. In addition to negotiating collective pricing on the bread-and-butter commodities and supplies used by most co-ops (nationally branded items like soy milk, potato chips, and paper shopping bags), the NCGA also approached business services organizations, such as merchandise inventory counters and credit card processors, to negotiate contracts for co-op members. This has had the effect of encouraging convergence of practices across co-ops. For example, the general manager of a small co-op in Michigan offered this account:

We never had inventory service. Volunteers did it on New Years Eve. We'd come and have a pizza party and do inventory. So two years ago [the professional service] was suggested to us and we were like, oh, I don't know. But we checked it out and it worked out really well ... They come in and within four hours they count the whole store!⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Interview, August 16, 2006.

The NCGA also employs regional “development directors” that offer business consulting services to member co-ops. One of these directors explained to me that his job involves helping store managers find ways to reduce their costs and to run more efficiency grocery stores. Finally, the NCGA has worked to establish a co-op “brand” identity for marketing purposes.

In other words, the NCGA brings several of the features associated with retail chain organization into the environment of natural foods co-ops, but walks a line between central co-ordination and local autonomy of member co-ops. In fact, the NCGA refers to itself as a “virtual” (as opposed to “actual”) chain of natural foods consumer co-operatives and has modified the retail chain model to accommodate the principle of local autonomy and the organization of existing co-ops. Individual stores preserve managerial control over their own operations. Member co-ops must contribute dues and capital to the NCGA, but make decisions about which NCGA programs, if any, to participate in. The NCGA itself has a professional staff and president, but also a board of directors elected from the staffs of member co-ops. The relationship between centralized management associated with the retail chain model and the independent identities and local relationships that all of the NCGA’s members have developed is an important issue for co-op leaders. As one co-op manager put it:

We're finding our way in not becoming Bed, Bath and Beyond. We're trying to model ourselves more on the national park system, where each individual location has its own gifts and attractions and is thriving because of where it is, but still has the benefit of a larger group's resources.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Interview, October 10, 2005. As a colleague pointed out, it is ironic that this co-op member, who advocates egalitarian and participatory forms of organization, would choose the national park system as

This manager contrasts the NCGA's model of organization with that of a typical chain store in order to envision an alternative path of development.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that leaders of co-ops have adapted to the organic industry's growth through organizational reforms that enhanced their stores' ability to compete with larger, more efficient rivals without undermining their identity as alternative, participatory organizations. First, leaders of co-ops have realigned the meaning of participation from member labor to member investment. This allowed them to preserve a focus on participation while also developing more efficient, professional store operations. Second, co-op leaders have loosened the connections between the voices and activities of store members and the day-to-day management and governance of the co-ops. This mechanism of loose coupling has been accompanied by ceremonies of participation in co-ops, which involve ordinary members but have less direct impact on co-op operations than did earlier forms of participatory management. Third, co-op leaders have combined features of co-op history and organization with models taken from the conventional grocery industry to create new organizations that bring some of the benefits of chain organization to independent co-op stores.

an organizational template. Cronon explains that in the United States, the creation of national parks required *excluding* (often violently) indigenous peoples from plots of land deemed to have priceless scenic or historical merit (Cronon, 1995).

For some, my discussion of collective identity and organizational change in co-ops might be taken as a cynical reflection on the flexibility of the meaning of participation. After all, if co-ops ask nothing more from their members than an annual investment and perhaps attendance at an occasional meeting, can they really be considered as an alternative to conventional business models? Isn't all of the talk about participation and cultural change just talk? However, this is not my intent. As I have emphasized throughout this chapter, the organizational adaptations that co-op leaders have created result in "real" organizational differences that separate them from mainstream stores, including alternative conceptions of management duties, support of community volunteer programs, and organization of member education opportunities. Similarly, the goals of member participation and economic democracy are real and meaningful to the leaders of co-ops – none of the individuals that I spoke with expressed cynicism about these objectives. These goals motivate co-op leaders to work long hours under uncertain conditions and lead them to seek out new ways, within the capabilities of their organizations, to involve members in the store and in their communities.

Instead, I would like for my discussion in this chapter to be read as an account of the challenges that face co-op leaders in a changing environment. As I explained at the beginning, rationalization and growth in the organic industry calls into question not only the economic survival of co-ops, but also their broader reasons for existing. In the face of these challenges, members of co-ops are finding creative ways to adapt their organizations to new market conditions without rejecting cultural commitments

that make co-ops distinct types of organizations. Part of the reason that co-op members display this organizational creativity is because they are able to draw on a rich history of ideas about participation and economic democracy. As they develop responses on the store level and collectively, it will be important to keep in mind the practices and ideas that establish continuity with their past as well as those that have changed to meet the needs of the present.

CHAPTER 4:
CONVERTING ACRES AND CHANGING CULTURE:
VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVE AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES
IN THE ORGANIC INDUSTRY

The previous two chapters showed that the organic industry's growth has created a variety of responses at the organizational level in mainstream retailers and co-ops. This chapter examines how industry growth affects the way that organic foods professionals talk about the goals and meaning of their work. I begin with a brief discussion of the sociological literature in order to demonstrate that sociologists analyze talk about motives to understand how people define social situations. In the case of the organic industry, I argue, professionals' different vocabularies of motive define the industry not only by articulating goals, but also by creating boundaries that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate members of the industry. In the remainder of the chapter, I analyze vocabularies of motive and boundary work in the discourse of organic industry professionals. First, I show that industry members distinguish their work from the work of professionals in the conventional foods industry by offering altruistic motives and motives derived from personal experience. In particular, professionals explain that the purpose of their work is to improve the environment and the healthiness of food. Next, I explain that professionals in the organic industry offer different accounts of what improving the environment means, which draw from

different cultural strands of the environmental movement. These different accounts have consequences for boundary work and contribute to disagreements and conflict in the industry. However, I also show that industry growth makes it increasingly difficult for professionals to draw clear boundaries in practice.

Motives and boundaries in sociological research

Sociologists have noted that talk about motives helps people define social situations in the course of interactions. This insight informed a seminal article by C. Wright Mills, which introduced the term “vocabularies of motive” into the sociological literature (Mills, 1940). Mills disagreed with certain contemporaries who suggested that social scientists could use talk about motives to measure the values and inner psychological states of particular individuals. Instead, he argued that talk about motives performs a social function – it enables people to present their activity to others in terms of its intended consequences and thereby to define the character of the social situation that they are acting in. Mills also explained that people do not simply invent motives on the spot when they are questioned about their activities. Instead, historical and institutional circumstances make a limited set of motives common and credible in particular social settings and time periods.

Scott and Lyman continued the conversation about motives in their analysis of how people “account” for mistakes or for the failure of a particular course of action to meet stated objectives. Like Mills, Scott and Lyman were interested in the ability of

talk to define social relationships and, in particular, to “shore up the timbers of fractured sociation ... [and] to repair the broken and restore the estranged” (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 46). A key point in Scott and Lyman’s article is that giving accounts (which usually also includes talk about motives) enables individuals to negotiate identities in a social relationship. Thus, for Scott and Lyman, accounting had an important strategic dimension because people use accounts of behavior in part to establish roles that they think will be advantageous to themselves in an interaction.

These studies of the social consequences of talk resonate with more recent work in the sociology of culture about the properties of symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are “distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space.” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). People create, maintain and defend these boundaries through talk, much in the same way that people use talk about motives and accounts of actions to create role identities (Lamont, 1992, 2000).

Scholars have argued that boundary work is an important part of legitimizing new fields of activity. For example, Gieryn pointed out that scientific researchers in Victorian England contrasted the motives and consequences of their work to those of engineers and members of the church in order to win support for science as a distinctive and legitimate endeavor (Gieryn, 1983). In a narrative that resonates with Mills’ and Scott and Lyman’s analysis of motives, Gieryn argued that this talk was part of a strategic effort on the part of science boosters to create a distinct social identity for scientific researchers. Scholars have also argued that people talk about

motives in order to define boundaries within particular fields of activity. For example, Binder examined vocabularies of motive (although she did not use this term) in a movement to reform primary school curricula to show that members of the movement with different visions of reform defined boundaries between Afrocentric and multiculturalist approaches and identities (Binder, 1999). In the wake of disputes over reform curricula, Afrocentric activists suggested that their opponents acted from corrupt and assimilationist motives in order to clearly distinguish their projects from those of the multiculturalists.

Thus far, the sociological literature presents vocabularies of motive as a means by which individuals link cultural scripts to strategies of boundary work in particular social situations. In other words, people draw from shared understandings and institutionalized expectations to offer motives and accounts that appear reasonable to other people. People also use talk about motives to establish differences between roles and to promote specific projects and ways of acting within those situations. By emphasizing the “situatedness” of motives in social action, sociologists have raised questions about what vocabularies of motives do in social settings rather than what motives represent about the values or psychology of the people that articulate them (see also Fligstein, 2001; Mills, 1940).

Given this perspective, the organic foods industry has several unique characteristics that make it an interesting case for the analysis of vocabularies of motive. The first characteristic has to do with the presence of multiple symbolic boundaries within this social setting. In the first place, the organic foods industry has

been defined throughout much of its history as different from and “outside” the mainstream foods industry. At the current time, ideas about the differences between organic and conventional foods have been codified into production standards by the USDA’s National Organic Program and represent the main justification for the price differences between organic and conventional products. However, as the second and third chapters of this dissertation demonstrated, a significant amount of interpenetration exists between the organizations and practices of the mainstream and organic foods industries. The boundaries between the organic and the conventional foods industry is also constantly shifting as various members of the industry revise their positions to meet strategic goals.⁶⁷ Members of the industry therefore must consider how their statements of motive will locate them in relation to the conventional foods industry.

Differences of opinion also exist within the organic industry itself about the course that organic foods should follow in the future. In a situation that is similar to the differences between activist agendas that Binder observed in her study of school reform campaigns, members of the organic industry engage in disputes about the content of certification programs, the practices of organizations, and the meaning of the word “organic.” In Chapter 1, I presented these differences in formal terms as a

⁶⁷ One very important example of this is the merger between the natural foods grocery chains Whole Foods Market and Wild Oats Market, which occurred in 2007 and 2008. The Federal Trade Commission initially turned down Whole Foods’ application to purchase Wild Oats and claimed that a merger would create an anticompetitive monopolist in the natural and organic foods retailing sector. In response, representatives from Whole Foods, such as the company’s co-founder John Mackey, argued that that it was incorrect to view Whole Foods as the leader in an organic foods retail sector. Instead, Mackey asserted that Whole Foods should be understood as a small player in the larger mainstream grocery industry and pointed to the increasing presence of natural and organic products in mainstream grocery chains to support this claim.

contrast between models of organization based on the principles of market efficiency and models of organization oriented towards humanistic outcomes. An examination of professionals' vocabularies of motive shows that they use elements of these different logics to create and maintain boundaries in practice.

A second unique characteristic of the organic industry is its relationship to the environmental movement. One of the most frequent claims that members of the organic industry make is that organic agriculture is better for the environment. This connection with the environmental movement expands the range of symbols and ideas that members of the organic foods industry can draw on to offer accounts of motives and to create symbolic boundaries. However, it also presents a challenge in that it is not necessarily easy to explain behavior in markets in reference to environmentalist goals. This challenge is complicated by the fact that the environmental movement itself offers different frameworks that define environmental problems and their solutions.

This chapter first considers how members of the organic foods industry present motives that distinguish their work from work in the conventional foods industry. I find that many (but not all) members emphasize boundaries between the conventional and organic foods industries by demoting motives related to private gain and promoting motives related to the public good and personal fulfillment. Next, I turn to two important environmentalist critiques of agriculture to identify different "frames" of motives offered by the environmental movement (Benford & Snow, 2000). Third, I

examine how members of the industry link these frames to accounts of market activity in ways that define difference *within* the organic industry.

Motives and Boundaries Between the Conventional and Organic Industries

How do professionals in the organic industry talk about the meaning and purpose of their work? In this section, I argue that many professionals use a discourse of altruistic motives and personal experience to contrast their career goals with those of professionals in the conventional foods industry. Professionals explained that they worked in the organic industry because they were committed to improving the environmental sustainability and the healthiness of the food industry, rather than simply to achieve success in the market. In addition, they recounted deeply meaningful personal experiences that made work in the organic industry more than just a job. For many professionals, these understandings of the meaning of their work distinguished the culture of the organic foods industry from that of the conventional foods industry. However, there are signs that the convergence between the two industries is challenging professionals' ability to maintain this distinction.

Environmentalism and vocabularies of motive

A number of organic industry professionals explained that they worked in the

organic industry in order to protect the natural environment and to improve peoples' health. For example, a co-op manager that I interviewed early in my research explained, "I enjoy most spending my life, my work life, basically, promoting an agricultural system that I think is pro-survival and I enjoy being part of a bigger mission than just running a grocery store." When I asked this professional to explain what she meant by "pro-survival," she responded that current, conventional agricultural practices create widespread social and environmental problems.

What that means to me is that our current agricultural system is based on the petrochemical industry and that the system for delivering the chemicals to the plants basically is a water system. Because of the amount of fertilizing, pesticing, fungiciding, insecticiding that we're doing, we are actually depleting the soil of nutrients and it's simply not sustainable. We are blowing away the topsoil because the root system and the insects that are beneficial to soil health are being destroyed. So the dirt which used to be mineral rich and nutrient rich, life giving, is turning out to need more and more supplementation from these chemicals. The amount of water that is used on the land, besides being a scarce resource itself, actually leeches out these life giving properties. So the dirt, which used to be clumpable, you know, when I was a kid you could pick up dirt and throw it at your sister and it would stay together in a dirt clod. Now when you pick up dirt it just basically crumbles in your hand because there's no life in the dirt. And as a result, the topsoil is blowing away. We have a very very thin layer of dirt that actually supports plant life. And reducing that, as we have in the last forty years by fifty percent, is moving us in the direction where we won't be able to support the kind of food production we need. In addition, it's not sustainable because the effect on the work force, the people who actually work in agriculture is horrendous, and the kind of food it's producing is not nutrient rich. We're just finding out now that things in trace amounts are extremely critical to human health, like zinc, magnesium and manganese. These things are just not in the soil anymore and as a consequence they are not in our food anymore. So people are getting sicker, and that's why I think it is not sustainable.⁶⁸

Survivalism, which argues that industrial activity has reduced the capacity of

⁶⁸ Interview, October 10, 2005.

the Earth to support human life, is a common theme in environmentalist discourse (Dryzek, 2005). In keeping with this theme, this professional argues that her work in the organic industry is part of a larger mission to protect human life itself, which is threatened by the practices of the conventional foods industry. If intensive “fertilizing, pesticing, fungiciding and insecticiding” continue, she believes, people will face not only food shortages, but declines in the quality of food that will threaten their health. These practices actually “leech out the life” from the soil, turning rich farmland into lifeless material that “just basically crumbles in your hand.” Similarly, they create “horrendous” conditions for farmworkers and produce food that lacks the nutrients that people need to stay healthy. This professional portrays the organic industry as life-sustaining rather than life-depleting and describes her work as part of a broad effort to transform the relationship between people and the environment.

Many professionals explained that their desire to improve the food supply and the agricultural environment motivated them to work in the organic foods industry more than the potential profits from the growing market did. While most of the professionals that I interviewed acknowledged a daily concern about the profitability of their business operations, they also frequently claimed that as individuals, they had chosen to work in the organic foods industry for altruistic reasons. A consumer products manager for one organic farm and food processor that served a national market, who is also a member of the National Organic Standards Board, explained:

I definitely only want to do work where there is a net positive happening for people and the planet and the organic food industry absolutely fulfills that in my way of thinking ... To me, kind of a pinnacle in my career trajectory is to manage a large NGO that is

involved in food issues, be it hunger or organic farming or something like that ... to me the trajectory, personally, especially getting involved in the NOSB, over the long haul would be moving towards a pure, an organization whose pure mission is helping people, a different bottom line.⁶⁹

In several ways, this professional's account mirrors the account discussed above that portrayed work in the organic industry as a way to remedy the negative effects of conventional agriculture on human and environmental health. However, she also describes her work in the organic industry as part of a journey towards a different type of “organization whose pure mission is helping people, a different bottom line.” For her, the organic industry represents a halfway point between the purely market-driven conventional foods industry and the more virtuous world of non-profit organizations.

A category manager who works in a national natural foods grocery store chain offered a similar account of the role of profits in his motivations to work in the organic industry. He explained:

I have been doing this since I was a kid and have loved it all the time and have always thought that doing this was something that would be of service to people because I knew that the food that people were eating was mostly terrible and what our industry had to offer over time was more and more alternatives that taste better and are better, made better, all that ... I'm one of those people that believed in it then, believes in it now, loves it, enjoys it, so no ifs, ands or buts. And of course you know the money making potential is huge because it offers the world something better than we have been eating.⁷⁰

This manager's conviction that organic foods offer a better and healthier alternative to non-organic foods lies at the center of his explanation of his decision to

⁶⁹ Interview, April 10, 2007.

⁷⁰ Interview, April 5, 2007.

work in the industry. He explains that he began working in the industry before it achieved its current market success and “believed in it then, believes in it now, loves it, enjoys it, so no ifs, ands or buts.” He mentions the profit-making potential of his work as an afterthought, rather than as a driving motivation. In general, this professional characterizes profits as a just reward for the services offered to people and the environment by the organic industry and as an indicator that the industry is on the right track.

Personal experiences and vocabularies of motive

In addition to describing the environmental and public health benefits of organic foods, professionals also referred to personal experiences and lifestyle choices to explain their decision to work in the organic foods industry. By blurring the boundaries between work and private life, these professionals portrayed their careers as more than just a job. They characterized their work as a choice that developed from personal experiences, rather than as simply a way to succeed in the marketplace. They spoke of "growing into" organic foods through the interests of their families and through work in recycling, organic agriculture and environmental activism while in college. Some professionals also described specific, personal events that caused them to turn to organic foods both as consumers and as a career. One co-op manager offered a particularly striking example of such an event:

I had already been a vegetarian for eight years and my mom passed away. We lived behind a potato farm on Long Island. I couldn't figure

out why at such a young age, at fifty seven, she had passed and read the Greenpeace report on the breast cancer warning, the chlorine report on the breast cancer warning and that was in the early nineties. And it really just hit home about agricultural chemicals, having lived behind a potato farm and watched it become a development, a housing development, and knowing all the pesticides that were put on that potato farm and what was in our water supply, and actually coming from a community in which there are no grandmothers. They all died quite young. A number of breast cancer, cervical cancer, throat cancer. All the women, a generation older than, my mom's generation, older than me, all passed away quite young.⁷¹

This professional explained that her mother's death created a gateway into environmental activism and work in organic foods co-ops; in fact, she made little distinction between these two activities. For her, consuming organic foods has a deeply personal meaning because it is one way to protect herself from the agricultural chemicals that she believes contributed to her mother's death. However, this personal experience and her work in the industry also connect her to a broader community of people that share similar concerns and values about the conventional food industry.

Similarly, the owner of a small chain of natural and organic foods stores explained:

To me this is an extension of who I am in my life. I've said it on numerous occasions, that I'm fortunate to be involved in a business that reflects my lifestyle. And to some extent my wife and my kids, who grew into the natural food products. People who go to work for forty hours a week doing something that they don't enjoy, I feel for them. You spend a lot of time going to work and hopefully it is something that you believe in, and fortunately that has been the case for me ... Most of the stuff I eat is organic and I try to lead a healthy lifestyle. So this is pretty much a reflection of my life.⁷²

Although this professional does not make an explicit connection between work

⁷¹ Interview, March 10, 2007.

⁷² Interview, October 26, 2005.

in the organic industry and negative experiences with conventional agriculture, he points out that his choice of a job reflects the decisions that he has made in his private life. He contrasts his situation with people who work only to survive in the market and who spend “forty hours a week” doing something that they do not “believe in.” Both of these professionals characterize work in the organic industry as a way to pursue deeply held convictions while also making a living.

Industry growth and boundary work

Accounts that emphasize the public good and personal experiences and convictions enable professionals in the organic industry to distinguish their work from work in the conventional foods industry. However, this boundary work takes place in a dynamic environment that is shaped by industry growth and restructuring, which challenges the clarity of the distinctions that the professionals draw. As the organic industry grows, these professionals increasingly become subjected to the institutions and imperatives that structure work in the conventional industry. For example, I spoke with one president of a small company that markets and designs clothing made from organic cotton and wool fiber. The account that she offered of her career history could have come from an entrepreneur in any number of industries: she gained marketing experience while working for a venture capital firm that had invested in a natural products company; she left the company to take advantage of an unexpected business opportunity; after suffering through the ups and downs of a rocky market, her

company had finally found a stable footing. However, when I asked about her own and her employees' motivations for working in the organic industry, her explanation suddenly left the discourse of market opportunities and challenges behind:

In general what still motivates people to stay [in this company] is at least somewhat of an interest in fair trade, ethical work contracts and organic/sustainable agriculture. Doing good, giving back, that kind of stuff ... We all supposedly, we all, the industry, anybody who has been involved in the organic industry, food, cotton, whatever, is generally speaking involved because they want to be, because they are somehow motivated to be involved in something that they believe is better than the status quo.⁷³

This busy professional's explanation raises as many questions as it answers. It has an off-hand character: "doing good, giving back, that kind of stuff." How do professionals know when they are doing good and how do they distinguish good works from private gain? This professional also hints at some uncertainty about the authenticity of peoples' motivations through her frequent use of qualifying phrases: "in general," "supposedly," "generally."

As this professional's account suggests the changing organization of the organic industry creates a murky context for boundary work. As the industry has grown, large companies that conduct most of their activities in the conventional foods sector have purchased established organic brands and added organic product lines to their portfolios. These companies do not make the sorts of distinctions between work in the organic and conventional industries that appear to be widespread among professionals that have spent much of their careers in the organic industry. Similarly, the staff in these companies are expected to handle both organic and conventional

⁷³ Interview, September 1, 2006.

product lines or to transition between the two as according to the needs of the company. These organizational pressures make it difficult for professionals to clearly distinguish between the two types of work.

The professional who described her ambitions to work in a food- or environment-focused non-profit organization experienced the pressures during her career. She explained that the contradiction between organizational imperatives and her own ethical commitments to organic foods caused her to leave a relatively secure job in order to work for an independent company that specialized in organic and sustainably-produced foods. Her personal beliefs and lifestyle had led her to seek work in the organic industry while an MBA student. She explained that:

there was one particular company that really caught my attention, which was Cascadian Farm and Muir Glen. This was just following the General Mills acquisition and just in researching that company I liked everything about them and I really decided I wanted to work for them. I liked what they were up to. I had already been a co-op member, a local food co-op member. My husband is totally an organic farmer from forever and we've gardened organically ... We had kind of been living the organic food lifestyle.⁷⁴

General Mills, a food industry conglomerate that had acquired the organic specialists Cascadian Farm and Muir Glen, initially supported her interests by offering her an internship to organize an internal educational program about the organic industry that enabled her to network with "the luminaries of the industry." She accepted a job with the company after graduation but found that, "as the transition to General Mills, kind of the mothership, evolved, I basically got to a standpoint where I needed to enter whole General Mills food system and become a line marketer. I could be reassigned

⁷⁴ Interview, April 10, 2007.

anywhere. My next assignment could have been Lucky Charms!" Instead, she chose to cut herself free from the "mothership" and enter the world of independent organic companies, which she described as less secure and predictable but ultimately more satisfying.

This industry reorganization has also brought new professionals into the organic industry who speak about and understand their work in different terms. Rather than emphasizing the ethical imperatives of organic production, these professionals identify with the market needs of their employers. This was the case for one professional who works for a food distribution subsidiary of a corporation that owns a number of regional grocery store chains. During the interview, he explained that he did not have a background or education in the organic industry, but that when his employer decided to launch a line of organic produce "it just kind of fell into place that I would be the one that would put the organic program together." When I asked about his motivations for working in the organic industry, he responded:

Do I eat it?!? Not so much ... The benefit for me on a personal level would only be that it's better for the environment. It wouldn't be flavor characteristics, it wouldn't be that I feel better about it, that it's healthier for me. None of that would enter the picture because if you prepare and wash your fruits and vegetables carefully you're not going to have anything that is going to harm you anyway. And I have no desire to live to a hundred and fifty! I guess you could paraphrase it in that I am interested in the organic businesses as long and as much as I can put some money to the bottom line of this company.⁷⁵

Unlike many of the other professionals that I spoke to, this individual portrayed his work in the organic industry as a matter of chance rather than choice because it was a

⁷⁵ Interview, September 22, 2006.

job that he was assigned when the company divided up the product responsibility categories. By minimizing the distinctions between the organic and the conventional industry, this professional insulates himself from risks inherent in a growing and unpredictable organizational field. In other words, if organics ceased to be profitable, he would simply move into another category of products without any challenge to his personal identity. He emphasized the similarity between work in the organic and conventional industries by dismissing critiques of health risks posed by conventional foods and implying that others within the organic industry have unreasonable expectations for these products. Finally, in direct contrast to other professionals that I spoke to, he elevated profit considerations rather than placing them as an afterthought.

In a sense, this professional's statement is the exception that proves the rule about the importance of environmental ethics in defining the professional identities of members of the organic foods industry. However, because the ethical justifications of the professionals are shaped at least in part by the organizations that they work for, it is likely that as more generalist companies invest in the organic industry, more professionals will talk about their work in pure market terms. This will continue to challenge the ability of professionals to clearly distinguish the culture of the organic industry from that of the conventional industry.

In the next section of the chapter, I turn to a different form of boundary work and a different sort of talk about motives. Although many members of the organic industry agree that the industry's purpose is to improve the effects of food production on the natural environment, they disagree about precisely what activities such

improvement requires. In particular, industry members draw on different environmentalist frames to describe the industry's goals and to draw boundaries that define who is and is not a legitimate member of the industry.

The diverse cultural legacy of environmentalism

The contemporary American environmental movement amalgamates a variety of different discourses, ideologies and cultural frames (Cronon, 1995; Dryzek, 2005; Gottlieb, 1993). In order to understand how the environmental movement influences the way that professionals create symbolic boundaries *within* the organic foods industry, I found it useful to think of environmentalist discourse in terms of two separate frames, which I call the “efficient reform” frame and the “crisis of culture” frame. According to Benford and Snow’s model of social movement frames, framing activities consist of diagnosing problems, attributing blame, and prescribing solutions to the problems (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988). As I will show, members of the organic foods industry draw on these frames to articulate different accounts of the industry’s goals and purpose. Although I will soon describe how these frames appear in particular examples of environmentalist discourse, I will first present the frames in formal terms.

Environmental advocates who use the efficient reform frame argue that environmental problems can be solved within existing social structures. As Figure 1 shows, this frame identifies inefficient and irrational industrial processes and

technologies as the root cause of environmental problems. In the case of agriculture, these processes and technologies include the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers that kill wildlife and pollute groundwater, rivers and oceans through runoff. They also include the overgrazing and pollution of land through intensive livestock production and the depletion of soils through the repeated planting of cash crops. These technologies are inefficient and irrational in the sense that they create long-term and widespread problems in exchange for short-term benefits. In large part, this frame attributes the existence of environmental problems to public ignorance about the effects of industry, although environmental advocates also argue that irresponsible politicians and profit-seeking enterprises actively work to keep important information out of the public eye. The assumption contained in this frame is that if citizens were aware of the connection between industrial practices and environmental problems, they would apply political and economic pressure to force industry to use less destructive techniques. Thus, this frame prescribes scientific research to identify connections between industrial processes and environmental problems and to develop alternative practices that the public can implement. These practices represent reforms of existing technologies rather than a restructuring of society as a whole. Advocates often argue that these reforms will not only improve the environment, they will make industry more efficient by minimizing waste.

In contrast to the efficient reform frame, the crisis of culture frame argues that only broad changes in understandings of nature can fix environmental problems. This frame identifies pollution as a symptom of a deeper problem, which is that members of

modern society fail to understand the nature of humans' relationship to the environment. Specifically, modern culture leads people to think of the environment as a resource to exploit for political and economic advantages, rather than as the source of life, creativity and order. This frame attributes the existence of environmental problems to features of modern life that alienate people from the natural world and from each other, including science, complex economies, and bureaucratic hierarchies. As long as these things dominate the culture and organization of a society, people will lack the understanding and will to address problems such as pollution in a way that will make a lasting difference. Therefore, this frame discredits scientific and technological "fixes" for environmental problems. Instead, this frame prescribes new forms of social organization, such as local food economies that connect people more closely with food production, to bring modern societies to a more sustainable understanding of their relationship to the environment.

Environmental discourse frequently combines elements of both frames for strategic reasons. For example, Rachel Carson's landmark book *Silent Spring* began with a "fable for tomorrow" that depicted a close-knit farming community whose relationship with nature had been disrupted by the products of the chemical industry. This "fable" resonates with the crisis of culture frame, but most of the book was devoted to a careful scientific analysis of the links between chemicals, such as DDT, and environmental problems, such as the failure of birds to reproduce. Carson concluded her book by calling on the public to assert its "right to know" and by proposing alternative technologies, such as biological methods of pest control, to

replace toxic chemicals (Carson, 1962, p. 278). Using both frames helped Carson's book appeal to a broad audience but also gain credibility amongst some scientists and policymakers.

Table 4.1: Environmentalist Frames

	Efficient Reform	Crisis of Culture
Diagnosis of the problem	Industrial processes and technologies, such as synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and the intensive use of farmland, create environmentally-destructive pollution.	Modern society has degraded the human relationship with the environment. Specifically, people think of the environment as a resource to be exploited for political and economic gain, rather than as the source of life.
Attribution of blame	An ignorant public, irresponsible politicians, corporations protecting short-term gain enable pollution to persist.	Scientific technology, complex economies, and bureaucratic organizations all alienate people from the environment and from each other.
Prescription	Scientific research identifies negative externalities of industry and proposes efficient solutions.	New forms of economic and social organization are needed to reconnect people and the environment.

In spite of this frequent combination, it is also possible to find examples of environmentalist discourse that employ the frames in relatively pure form. Two representative works are *Diet for a Small Planet* by Frances Moore Lappé and *The Unsettling of America* by Wendell Berry. Both texts appeared in the 1970s and dealt

specifically with the connections between agriculture and environmental problems. Analysis of these texts will help to show how the frames are used in practice and create a foundation for an examination of vocabularies of motive and symbolic boundaries *within* the organic foods industry.

Diet for a Small Planet and the efficient reform frame

Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* was first published in 1971 and later revised and re-released. The book achieved a prominent position in part because, like Carson's earlier *Silent Spring*, it provided extensive scientific evidence for the problems it described (Belasco, 1989). Lappé selected the American beef industry as the target of her criticism. Drawing on the environmentalist concept of finite natural resources -- the "small planet" metaphor of the title -- Lappé argued that the beef industry's inefficient practices could not be defended in an enlightened society.

In Lappé's view, the nature of cattle as a food source and the beef industry's management techniques contributed to environmental and social problems. For example, she pointed out that beef cattle converted sixteen pounds of potentially human-grade grain and soy feed into only one pound of edible meat. The food "lost" to the beef industry each year, she argued, would be enough to eliminate global problems of hunger. The innate inefficiency of cattle as sources of food was compounded by the practices of the beef industry. For example, the industry relied on cheap grain produced on farmland that could be growing crops for human

consumption in spite of research that indicated that cattle could produce quality meat by foraging on unused land or on waste such as orange rinds, overripe bananas, and even wood pulp. Lappé also argued that intensive cultivation of farmland to support cattle depleted soil and reduced the nutritional quality of agricultural output. She used scientific research to track the depletion of farmland through declines in the relative protein composition of agricultural commodities such as wheat. Finally, she castigated the meat industry for "wasting the waste" from the animals rather than recycling it into fertilizer, energy (by capturing methane gas), or animal feed (Lappé claimed that cattle could extract the same nutrition from treated chicken droppings as they could from soy-based feed).

Lappé claimed that her readers needed to accept that these scientifically-diagnosed problems existed and to change their diets to eat less inefficient meat and more plant-based foods. She pointed out that beef and other meats tended to concentrate pesticide residues whereas plant foods exposed consumers to lower amounts of pesticide per pound. In her book, Lappé provided detailed information about protein "complementarity" and substitution and two hundred pages of vegetarian recipes so that the transition to a meat-free diet could be both safe and enjoyable.

The scientific emphasis of Lappé's argument led her to describe most features of the natural world in technical terms. For example, the cattle at the heart of Lappé's argument were either "protein factories" if they were well-managed and did not consume human-grade food resources or "protein sinks" under the current system. She extended this technical approach to talk about food consumption. One elaborate chart

compared protein composition and "net protein utilization" for a variety of common foods. From this chart, readers might learn that while eggs are less than twenty percent protein, more than ninety percent of the protein in eggs is available for the human body to use. By contrast, meat products, which range between twenty and thirty percent protein composition, have "net protein utilization" scores of less than seventy. In an even more detailed set of tables, Lappé compared the protein composition of various meats, grains and vegetables to eggs, which she explained most nearly match an "ideal pattern" of protein.

The Unsettling of America and the crisis of culture frame

Like Frances Moore Lappé, Wendell Berry located agriculture at the center of ecological and social problems in American society. Unlike Lappe, he presented these problems and their relationship to agricultural practice as a "crisis of culture" (Berry, 1977, p. 39). In *The Unsettling of America*, published in 1977, Berry directed attention to the inner world of "character," which he identified with individual freedom, self-reliance and personal responsibility. Berry argued that the decline of independently-owned and operated farms and the industrial reorganization of agriculture was both a symptom of self-destructive tendencies in American society and a cause of social and ecological problems. The industrialization of agriculture, in Berry's view, perverted cultural understandings of food production, changing it from a nurturing to an exploitative and ultimately destructive activity. What Berry called "the exploitative

revolution" threatened not only social values and the environment, but also human survival itself by undermining responsible farming practices. "The first casualties of the exploitative revolution are character and community," Berry explained. "But character and community, – that is, culture in the broadest, richest sense – constitute, just as much as nature, the source of food" (Berry, 1977, p. 9).

Berry's critique of industrial agriculture targeted the scientists and corporations that created chemical fertilizers and intensive agricultural practices, but he also argued that a deeper problem that modern, industrial societies faced was the specialization of work, knowledge and responsibility. Berry explained that ideologies of efficiency and expertise in complex economies lead to the concentration of skills into the hands of experts. To most people, this seems like a reasonable way to organize production. At the level of culture, though, specialization leads to social disorganization and individual dissatisfaction. Berry asserted:

What happens under the rule of specialization is that, though society becomes more and more intricate, it has less and less structure. It becomes more and more organized, but less and less orderly. The community disintegrates because it loses the necessary understandings, forms and enactments of the relations among materials and processes, principles and actions, ideals and realities, past and present, present and future, men and women, body and spirit, city and country, civilization and wilderness, growth and decay, life and death – just as the individual character loses the sense of a responsible involvement in these relations. No longer does human life rise from the earth like a pyramid, broadly and considerately founded upon its sources. Now it scatters itself out in a reckless horizontal sprawl, like a disorderly city whose suburbs and pavements destroy the fields. (Berry, 1977, p. 21)

For Berry, specialization contributes to disintegration and meaninglessness in culture, society and individual character. Just as culture no longer establishes meaningful

oppositions between such paired concepts as “civilization and wilderness” and “life and death,” so do individuals drift free from a sense of responsibility and connection to others. This cultural anomie takes physical form in the “reckless horizontal sprawl” of the modern city, whose development creates environmental problems of pollution and land exhaustion.

Berry argued that even mainstream environmentalist organizations contributed to the problem of specialization. In the first place, these organizations encouraged contributions of money rather than asking people to devote time, effort and attention to environmental problems. For Berry, the “willingness to be represented by money” was a symptom of the problem of specialization and contributed to the decoupling of culture and experience and to fragmentation of character in modern society (p. 23). In particular, advocacy organizations shielded people from feeling a sense of personal responsibility for the quality of the environment. Complex organizations were also particularly susceptible to the contradictions associated with specialization. Berry supported this assertion by referring to a study that revealed “that some of our largest and most respected conservation organizations owned stock in the very corporations and industries that have been notorious for their destructiveness” (p. 17).

Berry went beyond advocating reforms of the existing system of food production and argued that the environmental and social problems of agriculture could only be solved by a change of consciousness and a renewed sense of responsibility to nature. This change would be based on understanding the connections between people and nature: that “our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and

out of our land; that as we and our land are part of one another, so ... human, plant and animal are part of one another and cannot possibly flourish alone" (p. 22). Berry argued that people could contribute to this change by becoming conscious, informed, and responsible consumers. Rather than viewing food as an undifferentiated commodity, the responsible consumer would understand qualitative differences between farming methods and the foods that they produce and "would refuse to purchase the less good" (Berry, 1977, p. 24). This consumer would take personal responsibility for making consumption choices rather than succumbing to pressures to consume beyond immediate needs that proliferated in industrial societies. She would "also be in some way a producer" of food through home-prepared meals or kitchen gardens in order to avoid the problematic estrangement from the land (Berry, 1977, p. 24). Thus, the ideal consumer would reject, at a deeply personal level, the "abstract values of an industrial economy" that reduced land, livestock and labor to calculations of profit and efficiency (Berry, 1977, p. 6).

A comparison of the frames

The works by Lappé and Berry do not perfectly represent the two frames of environmentalism, but they do offer contrasts that help give substance to a formal account of these two frames. First, they define the source of environmentally and socially destructive practices in agriculture differently. Lappé argues that problems result from a lack of efficiency and irrational choices with the system of agricultural

production. Most importantly, the decision to invest resources in beef production squanders resources that could be used to nourish people and maintain healthy farmland. She claims that these practices need to be redesigned by considering an "enlightened rationality" that would bring agricultural practices in line with ethical concerns about equality and dignity. For Berry, environmentally destructive agricultural practices result from the breakdown of cultural order. Rationality is not the solution for Berry; in fact, it is an important part of the problem. Both authors do argue that the agricultural industry needs to be guided by social and environmental ethics. However, Lappé suggests that these ethical goals can be reached by modifying the existing, industrial system of food production, while Berry calls for a complete overhaul of this system. For Lappé, it is enough for people to eat soybeans and vegetables produced on large, highly efficient farms, while Berry insists that they must interact directly with the land that produces their food, or at least, with the independent farmer that works the land.

Differences between the two authors also appear in the metaphors and forms of credible knowledge that they present in their arguments. Lappé offers an account that reduces food to its nutritional elements and the costs required to produce it. Berry, on the other hand, views food as a symbol of social relationships and as a product of culture. He suggests that decline in food quality in industrial society and increase in the environmental costs of food production reflect the breakdown of moral order and the degradation of human relationships. These elements hardly enter Lappé's discussion. Finally, the two authors offer different models of virtuous consumer

behavior. For Lappé, the virtuous consumer is one who understands the scientific research that indicates the feasibility of a vegetarian diet and acts to make responsible changes in consumption. Berry, on the other hand, views the virtuous consumer as one that resists the attack of industrial specialization on preindustrial notions of self and community.

Now that I have defined these environmentalist frames in formal terms and described how they appear in discourse, I turn to an analysis of how members of the organic industry use these frames to talk about the purposes and goals of the organic industry and to determine which organizations and people are legitimate members of the industry. First, I will show that the efficient reform frame contributes to discussions of the industry's purpose that emphasize converting acres to organic production as a way to achieve environmental improvement. Second, I will argue that other members of the industry mobilize the crisis of culture frame to argue that the organic industry has an obligation to transform the relationship of people to the environment. These different vocabularies of motive, which define the industry's overall objectives, lead to different patterns of boundary work against mainstream food companies, consumer activists, and the national organic standards.

Converting acres: The efficient reform frame in the organic industry

When speaking about the organic industry from within the framework of efficient reform, professionals frequently define the industry's goals in quantitative

terms. Professionals often emphasize converting acres of farmland from conventional to organic management. As the national marketing manager of one firm put it:

I'd say the most satisfying [part of my job] is actually being able to make things happen on a significant scale on both the supply and demand side. Being able to ask for a million more pounds of organic pumpkin, knowing that acreage is being farmed organically, and then going out there and creating a marketplace for that product. And sort of seeing that fulfilled again and again.⁷⁶

When talking about her goal of quantitative increase in organic acreage, this professional describes organic agriculture as a more virtuous technology than conventional farming methods and measures progress towards environmentalist goals in terms of replacing conventional crops with organic ones. She does not advocate reforming the social organization of food production and distribution, but rather suggests that food industry's large-scale efficiencies can be harnessed to bring about positive environmental changes.

Professionals also use quantitative language to describe the problems created by conventional agriculture and the ways that organic agriculture addresses these problems. The president of a company that markets clothing made from organic cotton offered one example. Her firm began by selling printed organic tee shirts for corporate promotions, both because a market existed for this product and because:

the typical American tee shirt uses a half a pound of cotton and a third of a pound of pesticides, so the impact was really high ... Cotton uses more pesticides than any other crop except coffee and it's awful for the earth and there's chemical drift and all these problems, but also in every post harvest stage of production, there are many additives added that are carcinogenic, mutagenic, could kill people, you wouldn't want

⁷⁶ Interview, April 10, 2007.

to be around, et cetera.⁷⁷

For this professional, the environmental benefit of organic cotton was that it removed toxic pesticides and processing agents from the environment. This benefit was closely connected with the growth in her company's sales. The more organic tee shirts that her company was able to sell, the more pounds of pesticides they would prevent from being released into the environment and the more factory and farm workers they would protect from the hazards of conventional cotton processing.

When professionals speak about their motives and the goals of the organic industry in these quantitative, reformist terms, they tend to embrace the notion of a diverse industry that includes both organic specialist companies and mainstream food companies attracted to the industry by its potential profits. A broad, inclusive industry, according to these professionals, ensures that more acres will be converted to organic production and that fewer toxic chemicals will be released. In addition, professionals argue that mainstream food companies help to extend the benefits of organic foods consumption to greater numbers of people. As the national marketing manager that I quoted above explained:

I don't see the entry of large players as a threat, and I will give you just a concrete example. The company that I used to work for, General Mills, which is usually kind of the poster child of "big organic" now, they have a line of frozen fruits and vegetables, and as they have decided to take those products more into the mainstream or even the late adopter stage of organics, they are bringing those products to a much wider audience at a lower price. So there's some consumers being introduced to products for the first time and it is getting them to start thinking about their own health, the health of the environment, making food choices that reflect the real cost of food, et cetera. So I think that

⁷⁷ Interview, September 1, 2006.

they are welcoming some people that were on that price/demand curve that there wasn't any price point for them before.⁷⁸

This professional explains that mainstream food companies have an ability to widen the selection and lower the price of organically produced consumer goods, which brings new segments of the consuming public into the market. On one hand, these new consumers magnify the environmental impact of the organic industry in quantitative terms. However, she also believes that organic products from these large companies might serve as a gateway into more extensive habits of organic consumption for these consumers. She explains that by “getting them to start thinking about their own health, the health of the environment, making food choices that reflect the real cost of food,” products from these large companies might also increase consumers desire to purchase organic products from smaller, specialist companies and their support for the organic industry as a whole. It is important to note that this professional’s description of changes in attitudes amongst consumers is much less extensive than the notion of transformed consciousness that exists in the crisis of culture frame. While this professional argues that the organic industry can lead consumers to begin thinking about the broader impacts of their food choices, she also assumes that these questions will not lead consumers to reject large farms, supermarkets and other institutions and organizations that enable a national food market to exist. Unlike Wendell Berry, she does not argue that consumers should seek out personal relationships with farmers and engage in gardening and other forms of food production to regain a personal connection with the natural world.

⁷⁸ Interview, April 10, 2007.

While professionals who speak about the organic industry as an efficient reform of food production tend to embrace firms of all sizes that play by the rules of the organic regulations, they exclude people and organizations that oppose industry growth or that challenge the legitimacy of the national organic standards. For example, professionals that I spoke to criticized consumers' groups for challenging the efforts of large retailers to enter the organic industry. One of these groups, the Cornucopia Institute, brought a complaint against the retailer Wal-Mart for mislabeling non-organic products as organic in several stores. In response, one public relations consultant who had worked closely with the Organic Trade Association argued that this group's concerns and tactics had no place in a developing industry:

I think that the Cornucopia Institute, again, from my dealings with them in all the other things, are utopian organic, in that camp. The last thing that they want to see is Wal-Mart selling organic groceries, produce or products. And unfortunately for them, the train left the tracks a long time ago, the train left the station a long time ago. And you know, we're already well past the utopian organic world. It's long, long past. Ten, twelve, fifteen years ago past. And you can't get it back. And for them to think that a Wal-Mart is not going to have organic products is not realistic.⁷⁹

By characterizing the members of the Cornucopia Institute as "utopian organic," this professional implies that they do not understand how the industry has developed over the past decade. She also characterizes their objectives as unreasonable, given the industry's current state. More importantly, she suggests that the activities of the Cornucopia Institute have the potential to damage the environmental benefits that the organic product lines of large firm like Wal-Mart will bring. These benefits include

⁷⁹ Interview, March 28, 2007.

the conversion of acres of land to organic production, livelihoods for organic farmers, and a broader range of organic products available to consumers. By contrast, this professional argues that anti-growth consumers' groups seek to limit the supply of organic products. For example, she explained that in the interview that these groups' protests might cause the organic milk industry to "become a niche again where you get it delivered in your milk box on Monday morning by the milk man. And I think that is what Cornucopia wants. Back to utopia again!"

Changing human relationships with nature: The crisis of culture frame in the organic industry

In contrast to those who framed organic agriculture as an efficient reform of the food industry, professionals who drew on the crisis of culture frame of environmental improvement argued that members of the organic foods industry have a responsibility to forge connections between food consumers, food producers, and the earth itself. These professionals claimed that connections were important because they helped people recognize their dependency on, and responsibility to care for, the earth. Through the medium of food, these professionals claimed, consumers could develop a sense of moral obligation towards the environment.

These professionals' concerns about personal responsibility are especially evident when they speak about their interactions with children. Within the organic industry, professionals tend to portray children as surrounded by tempting, if perilous,

conventional foods. As one co-op manager put it,

It turns out that it is around junior high that you start making assessments about your own life. You start, you know, becoming more of a person within yourself. So these are the future decision makers about food and what is healthy, and if all they hear about is Coke and fast foods, if that is what they are surrounded with, that is what they are going to be naturally drawn to when they begin to have their own families. We think that is really a dangerous trend. We already have now one in three people get cancer. One in three in the United States of America. That's an astonishing fact. And we think a lot of it is based on poor nutrition. You know, there's no reserves. Obesity's a problem, sugar consumption, they are not good things.

MH: Would you say it is important mainly for their future health or the health of their families, or also in a sense to be good citizens?

MC: Yeah, I think all those things. You know, to make wise decisions to be good stewards of the land. To understand that you need to steward the land, you know.⁸⁰

For this manager, organic food not only helps protect the health of children, it also acts as a medium to educate them about their individual responsibilities in a world where moral signposts are missing. She argues that if children only have access to unhealthy, conventional foods while growing up, they will probably provide these same foods to their own families later in life. She believes that this contributes to environmental and public health problems. In contrast, eating organic foods can help children learn “to be good stewards of the land” in order to protect their own well-being. In other words, understanding food production anchors children in a confusing and anomic culture. Along the same lines, one independent organic farmer explained: "There is a real benefit for kids growing up knowing how food is grown, like where their food comes from and how it is made. Where the hamburger comes from. It is really important that

⁸⁰ Interview, October 10, 2005.

kids grow up knowing that instead of being so incredibly separated from their food."

These professionals also drew on the theme of individual responsibility towards the environment to talk about the motivations and activities of members of the organic foods industry. In particular, they emphasized the alignment of actions with beliefs and convictions about what is right. Professionals were especially keen to point out that they made these alignments even in areas that were invisible to consumers and that they did so even when it imposed additional expenses on their organizations. The professionals highlighted specific activities, such as recycling, limiting the use of plastic bags, and investing in solar power as indicators of moral purity. The manager of a small natural foods co-op explained to me that:

The workers here, they walk the talk. They go home and recycle. We use Seventh Generation toilet paper and paper towels in the bathroom. We don't go and get the cheapo, wherever it comes from stuff. To me that says something about the ethics of a place. Not that we do everything perfectly, but we sure try. And I think that some places get down to bottom line economics, well, we're going to sell Seventh Generation toilet paper because that is what the customers want because they think they want green products, but in the back room it is cheaper for them to use cheapo toilet paper so that is what they get. And I think that is true for a lot of things in those stores. Certainly we have regular light bulbs in our fixtures in some of the store, but we try to get the high efficiency fluorescent and do everything as ecologically as we can.⁸¹

Importantly, this co-op manager distinguishes commitment from efficacy. As I explained in the previous section, professionals who portray organic foods as an efficient reform of the food industry tend to talk about the impact of organic production in quantitative terms, such as by discussing the number of acres converted

⁸¹ Interview, August 16, 2006.

to organic agriculture. Instead, the co-op manager explains that employees at her business “walk the talk” – even though their individual decisions to recycle and use environmentally-friendly products may have little impact on large environmental problems and even though they sometimes fall short of their goals, what is important is that they “sure try” to bring their practices in line with their sense of personal responsibility towards the environment. For her, this distinguishes the “ethics” of her store from those of larger competitors who make decisions on the basis of “bottom line economics.” These larger competitors sell organic and environmentally beneficial products to customers, but use inexpensive, conventionally-produced alternatives in the parts of their stores that the customers do not see.

More generally, professionals who drew on the crisis of culture frame suggested that the mass production of food for profit undermined the quality of food and the order of the natural world. One professional who worked as a manager in an independent organic foods store and owned a small organic farm explained:

I think that the food is definitely better quality when it is not grown and processed industrially. I think that things created on a smaller scale just by definition are going to be better quality because they don't have to use a lot of the cost-saving techniques that big processors do in industrial agriculture to grow their food, like hormones and antibiotics in chicken feed to make them grow faster, hormones in animals to make them grow, in cows and pigs and sheep. I think that a lot of those things have been created by big industrial ag in order to cut costs and increase their bottom line. Things like putting blood in calf feed in industrial feedlots. Ultimately I do think that it does benefit the community when their food isn't produced that way.⁸²

For this professional, the profit-oriented “cost-saving techniques” of large,

⁸² Interview, May 26, 2006.

conventional food producers lead to a disruption of the normal growth cycles of farm animals and to bizarre practices such as feeding blood to calves. Notice too that this professional, like Wendell Berry, connects respect for nature with a positive social order. Referring to “industrial” practices of animal husbandry, she argues that “it does benefit the community when their food isn’t produced that way.” The implication of this professional’s account is that industrial organization causes these negative practices. In other words, if organic production is carried out on a large scale, it will also become more distant from and destructive of the natural world and human communities.

By presenting the organic industry as an ethical project tied to meaningful social relationships and individual commitments, members of the industry also criticized the national organic standards. Instead of presenting the standards as an objective guarantor that organic practices will have a positive environmental impact, they suggested that the impure motivations and economic power of large, conventional foods companies will enable them to manipulate the standards to achieve a market advantage. Several professionals that I spoke to were especially critical about the Organic Trade Association’s (OTA) political intervention in response to Arthur Harvey’s legal challenge to the National Organic Program in 2006. While the OTA defended this action by claiming that it was necessary to protect the industry’s growth and accomplish the mission of converting more acres to organic agriculture, these professionals argued that the informal political campaign undermined the moral character of the industry. One professional, in particular, criticized the OTA for hiring

“tobacco attorneys” – the same lobbying firms that had helped tobacco companies reach a settlement! The professional explained:

This time around, with Harvey, it was really a divide within the industry itself, and it was probably the first way in which the industry was kind of tested and I think OTA’s process, although I think OTA’s position was pretty reasonable on a handful of the additives, I think the process was pretty lousy ... The folks that OTA hired to do their lobbying and their attorneys certainly weren’t interested in creating a transparent process. It was, let’s get this thing done on behalf of our vendors and manufacturers as quickly as they possibly can. And they won!⁸³

In addition to suggesting that the organic standards have been captured by representatives of large companies that lack a personal ethical commitment to organic production, professionals who draw on the crisis of culture frame also explain that standardization undermines virtuous social relationships between industry members. They argue that the standards have replaced co-operation between industry professionals with bureaucratic compliance and competition. For example, one independent grower, who also worked as a manager in a small store, described her disappointment that certification agents were no longer allowed to give advice to growers under the new rules. She continued:

When we were doing it in the old days we were helping each other and it was much more of a shared environment. I realize that we have kind of brought this on ourselves but I guess we had no idea of how the system does not work anymore for people who just want to grow and sell locally and who have other issues that are important to them that are not part of the NOP. At some point we just realized that we do not want to abandon our growing practices because we were the ones who started in the first place. Now all of these bureaucrats have taken it over and it is not something that we can work with anymore.⁸⁴

⁸³ Interview, January 10, 2006.

⁸⁴ Interview, May 26, 2006.

Similarly, professionals draw on the crisis of culture frame to argue that the organic standards undermine connections of farmers to the land that they work and to the communities that they live in. One co-op education director complained,

You can have an organic feedlot farm, where you've got horrible animal waste product run-off and soil erosion and all these things happening, but you can still get that organic label. So if I am a local hog farmer and I am working with like three hundred pigs, I am taking care to make sure that the water stays clean and the soil stays where it is and the waste is disposed of properly and the animals are fed what they actually like to eat that is natural, I want to be able to distinguish myself by saying I'm organic but also I'm sustainable or I'm whatever this word is going to be. We need another word. We need another way to describe what it is that we're doing because if we are going to have federal standards that aren't going to be as stringent, then we need to be able to communicate to consumers that we're doing the minimal organic stuff that the government requires. In addition to that, we really are being stewards of the land and we really are looking after people in that sense.⁸⁵

This professional argues that the organic standards do not enable farmers to communicate the quality of their environmental practices nor their sense of personal responsibility to the environment and to local communities to consumers. By placing an ethically-committed farmer in the same marketing category as an "organic feedlot farm," the standards encourage lowest common denominator organic production. Instead, this professional calls for another marketing denomination that will enable farmers to communicate stewardship to consumers, rather than simply compliance with the letter of the law.

Finally, professionals who describe the organic industry as a response to a crisis of responsibility and values tend to draw boundaries against large food

⁸⁵ Interview, April 18, 2006.

corporations, which they sometimes describe as having entered the industry for purely selfish reasons without understanding or valuing the ethical imperatives of organic agriculture. Professionals contrast a “golden age” of moral purity in the organic industry with the corrupting influence of these large corporations. According to one co-op manager, for example:

We’re just beginning now to see organic used as a marketing tool. But up to the last year or so, really the people who were in organics were the idealists. They weren’t looking necessarily to create a brand of organic to sell. They were just doing good stewardship of the land and taking care of people’s health and their own health in a lot of cases.⁸⁶

These professionals draw on a moral vocabulary, filled with references to integrity and commitment, to question the presence of these companies in the organic industry. One store owner put it this way:

The concern is now you have people, be it General Mills or Smuckers or ... I’m trying to think of some of the others ... Heinz, they own a lot of the natural food companies. I don’t begrudge them if there is a profit to be made, that’s what their business is, but are they committed to the industry in the vein that a lot of the original people that started the company have been? So the concern is that the direction of the industry won’t be as true, that at the end of the day, decisions will be made that will result in the greatest profit, not what’s best for the industry. It’s a legitimate concern.⁸⁷

He is describing a relationship between companies where those that put ethical commitments over the pursuit of profits are being crowded out by less scrupulous newcomers, which undermines the purity and integrity of the industry as a whole. Like Berry’s discussion of the environmental crisis as a crisis of culture, the foundation of this argument is not quantitative and easily measurable but qualitative and humanistic.

⁸⁶ Interview, October 10, 2005.

⁸⁷ Interview, October 26, 2005.

Boundary work and structural positions in the organic industry

So far, I have presented examples of discourse to show that professionals connect the purposes and consequences of organic foods production to different frames of environmentalism. However, this does not answer the question of which professionals use which frames in what context. It would be easy to assume that the accounts offered by professionals would simply reflect their economic position in the structure of the industry. After all, the reform frame, with its emphasis on converting the maximum number of acres to organic cultivation and its faith in impersonal standards justifies the participation of large, growth-oriented firms in the organic industry. The crisis of culture frame, by contrast, celebrates the individual responsibility and human relationships associated with small businesses. In fact, some industry members assume that frames reflect structural positions. When I asked a mid-level manager in a national distributing firm what he thought of campaigns to limit the size of organic farms, he replied with a laugh, “It must be people arguing that are in that small, local business themselves.” However, in my research, I discovered a more complex picture. To a greater or lesser extent, most of the industry professionals granted some degree of legitimacy to both cultural models.

On one hand, the finding that professionals combine frames is linked to the fact that the economic interests of different professionals in the industry both diverge and converge. First, let’s consider the divergent tendencies. As the Harvey lawsuit

demonstrated, challenges to the organic standards in the name of morally committed independent farmers have the ability to put the investments of larger companies at risk. Several consumers groups have used ideas of stewardship and individual commitment to attack the practices of the NOP and of particular large companies. On the other side, the organic standards actually do place a financial burden on small farmers, which larger growers are better equipped to handle. On the retail side of the industry, independent stores and co-ops face competitive pressures from chain retailers. These divergent economic interests would suggest that people in different structural positions would use different frames and boundary work to try to push opponents out of the industry. However, focusing only on divergence and competition obscures the points where the interests of members of large and small corporations converge. According to many of the professionals that I spoke to, the growth of the industry has been a “rising tide that lifts all ships” as more customers entering the industry create more resources for all industry members, both large and small. Similarly, all members of the industry have an interest in continuing to distinguish their products from conventional foods products.

Beyond these economic considerations, features of the frames of environmentalism also complement, rather than oppose, one another in certain ways. In other words, it is possible for industry members to argue both for improved technologies and for a transformation of cultural relationships to the environment. From my interviews, I also have little doubt that most professionals that I spoke to personally think it is a good thing *both* to increase the number of acres under organic

cultivation *and* to preserve the livelihoods of independent organic farmers and businesspeople. Indeed, these two goals have only recently begun to come into a certain amount of conflict within the industry. Because industry growth, which tended to highlight the distinctions between these two frames, is relatively new, people who have participated in the industry for most of their careers are not accustomed to managing the possible contradictions.

In practice, industry members who are structurally positioned in large companies often draw the boundaries of the market in a way that includes most smaller companies. One of my interview respondents demonstrates this. She is a national manager for a company that produces organic ingredients and private label products for mainstream grocery stores. Her professional future is also closely connected to the organic standards, as she is a member of the National Organic Standards Board. In her view,

I think that the dichotomy of really large companies in organic that are pushing the envelope and are pushing to have as many materials added to the list as possible so that they can have close proxies of conventional products and, I'll just call it anyways, another extreme of a very small, local organic farm that feels like they are the true gold standard of what organic should be, and these people not having a whole lot of common ground, maybe, is in general a healthy thing. I think that the industry should be that broad. It should have all different sizes of players and that the whole industry should stay engaged in the same level of communication at trade events and seminars and as many forums as make sense.⁸⁸

She touts the virtues of communication among diverse industry members, as long as communication can bridge the gap in interests and concerns among different

⁸⁸ Interview, April 10, 2007.

industry members. However, she draws a boundary against people that criticize industry expansion in no uncertain terms: “I think it’s un-American actually to tether companies in a way where we say, you’ve sold out if you are going to go after that [broader] segment of the market. It’s like, they can do what they want. This is America! And we’ve already put rules in place that govern the way organic food is grown and processed and I am personally responsible for the next five years for that and I take it very seriously.” Although she is willing to open the industry up to people with diverse concerns and goals, she believes that formal rules, not individual ethical convictions, form the industry’s foundation.

Like the members of the larger companies, professionals who work for small, independent firms often draw inclusive industry boundaries in practice. They do this not only because they benefit economically from the industry’s growth, but also because they value the ends that the larger companies are able to achieve with their size. However, these professionals’ concern with individual ethical convictions calls the motives of these larger companies into question (and thus their legitimacy as industry members). As a result, the accounts of the independent store owners and growers tend to be fairly ambivalent – they embrace the possibility of large companies to create real changes but also express suspicion or even fear about these companies. This ambivalence is evident in one store manager’s description of her current competition:

It's a spooky thing when Wal-Mart starts demanding organic products. I don't really believe that just because it's a large corporation or just because it's big that it's evil and that it has bad intent. But I certainly think that it is suspect. And to have Wal-Mart basically driving the

demand of organic supply is pretty frightening to me because I think that there is some concern about the standards, I mean obviously we have national standards, but of just a little bit more corruption of people and that we won't be able to keep up with it in a way that preserves the integrity of that industry. It's really hard to say. People are really fickle ... the consumer is going to drive it and I think that there will be a smaller percentage of people that are still very committed to buying from smaller manufacturers and growers and will seek out those products and there is a whole nother [sic] group, you know, the Cascadian Farms and all of those that have sold to Dean Foods, and who knows if that will just be on every shelf and will become the perceived, this is the brand to buy. And there is something kind of good about that, provided the integrity is preserved. I'm not a person who feels like we really need to be threatened. You just need to continue to move forward and try as much as you can to listen to your consumer and your customer and provide good service and try to be the best that you can be.⁸⁹

The moral anxiety that this professional feels leaps out of her account.

Although she does not believe that “just because [Wal-Mart is] big that it’s evil,” she does find its investment in the organic industry to be “spooky” and “suspect.”

Drawing on the crisis of culture frame of environmentalism, she suggests that large companies bring “corruption” and threaten the “integrity” of organic products. On the other hand, she admits that there is “some kind of good” about the ability of more consumers to access organic products as a result of mass marketers like Wal-Mart. In this, she resembles other independent professionals that recognized that the mass market retailers could have positive effects, including one manager who explained, “Wal-Mart is going to start carrying organic food. There are some really good benefits to that obviously. The more demand that there are organic ingredients, that means the more land that there will be in organic acreage and that is less petro-chemical nitrogen

⁸⁹ Interview, May 16, 2006.

that is going into our groundwater.” In spite of her first rather dark statements about Wal-Mart, this professional ends on a positive note, claiming that “you just need to continue to move forward” and that she is “not a person who feels like we need to be threatened.” Her overall assessment of Wal-Mart and other conventional companies in the organic industry remains ambiguous in this passage.

Markets and public good

I began this chapter by explaining that sociologists examine how people talk about motives in order to understand how people define the nature of social situations and establish roles and identities in interaction. Recently, sociologists have used the metaphor of boundaries to interpret such discursive work, which frequently involves the classification of people and objects into different categories. In other words, talk about motives usually establishes categories and boundaries as a means to define social situations.

In this chapter, I showed that professionals in the organic foods industry use accounts of their motives to define the boundaries between the organic and the conventional foods industry and also to articulate different conceptions of insiders and outsiders within the organic foods industry itself. By talking about serving the public good and personal experiences, organic industry professionals define their work as having different meanings and consequences than work in the conventional foods industry. Within the organic foods industry, professionals draw on different frames of

environmentalism to offer somewhat incommensurable accounts of the purposes of the industry as a whole. In both contexts, the accounts of motives and the boundaries that professionals create are murky and blurred in practice, in part because of the rapid changes in the industry's size and structure.

It is striking that in spite of the differences in accounts of motives and boundaries in the organic foods industry, nearly all of the professionals that I spoke with argued that the organic industry exists in order to benefit society as a whole through an improved environment and a more healthy food system. By examining how members of the industry define their work in relation to these benefits to society, we can see that the two different frames of environmentalism offer different ways to connect the models of organization that I discussed in Chapter 1 to the common good. The efficient reform frame emphasizes rationalized organization, while the crisis of culture frame presents the market as a democratic arena for individual freedom and creativity.

The efficient reform frame suggests that markets serve the public good by allocating resources efficiently to solve environmental problems. Markets function best when distractions and uncertainties are eliminated and companies can focus on efficiency measured in quantitative terms. Drawing on this frame, some professionals argued that ideas that distracted public attention from organic foods undermined the environmental goals of the industry. One industry member complained, "all of the stories that have been about organic [in the media] have been about, local is better, the organic fad is over. You know, you probably saw the Time Magazine cover story. So

my job then is to fight that perception. Hey, it's not a fad. We're not talking about a fad here. It's here to stay and it's an agricultural method and it is still as popular as it ever was, if not more." When the organic industry is viewed as a project of reform, market activity is understood to serve the public good when professionals and consumers clearly understand distinctions between organic and conventional foods because these distinctions are founded on objective rules. Thus, the nature of the product and the goals of the industry should not be in question so that companies can focus on growing the industry itself.

According to the crisis of culture frame, the market is an arena of individual freedom where people can pursue their beliefs by connecting with others that have similar moral concerns and convictions. Markets function in this way when they are not constrained by legal rules that emphasize compliance over conviction or dominated by large companies that offer homogenous products to a mass of consumers. While criticizing the organic standards, professionals draw on the humanistic model to put their faith in the market to offer products that meet moral guidelines. One co-op manager described her view of market responsiveness: "If they loosen the [organic] standards or allow some of these things to go into the products, I think that the market will respond by having alternatives. They might not be called organic. There has been a lot of talk in the trade about getting a new kind of designation. ... That's going to mean it's organic plus, so to speak. So I think that the market will respond if the standards get diluted." This professional seems to reify the market as an agent itself. However, in the context of the interview, she presents the

market as an arena where people with similar beliefs can meet one another and establish relationships. Thus, her assertion that "the market will respond" to a decline in the quality of organic foods is better understood as an assertion that consumers will turn away from adulterated products and support industry professionals in stores and farms that share their higher ethical standards. Therefore, markets serve the public good by enabling such free choice and by enabling both consumers and producers to act on their convictions.

These different accounts of motivations connect organic foods to public benefits in different ways. However, the success of the organic foods industry as a whole and of particular companies and professionals depends on the purchasing behavior of consumers. In the next chapter, I examine how professionals understand and interact with consumers.

CHAPTER 5:

FRAMING MOTIVATIONS AND INVOLVING CONSUMERS

An argument that has run through this dissertation is that different cultural models of organization within the organic industry influence the organization of companies and the behavior and identity of industry professionals in important ways. This chapter continues to develop this argument by asking, how do industry professionals think about and relate to the consumers upon whose purchases the industry depends? As in my chapters about organizational features and environmentalist vocabularies of motive, I will argue that at least two opposing ways to think about organic consumers exist. On one hand, industry members can relate to them as politically engaged participants in a movement for social change. On the other hand, consumers can be viewed as individualistic market agents. I argue that although traces of the first model can be seen in the discourse of industry professionals, it is the second model that more frequently guides representations and interactions with consumers.

I begin the chapter with a brief discussion of literature about consumer activism to put this question in perspective. In the second part of the chapter, I examine the ideas and assumptions that professionals draw on to talk *about* consumers. Next, I investigate the techniques and programs that professionals use when they interact *with* consumers. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the nature of citizenship in market settings.

Models of consumer behavior in American culture

Studies of consumer culture in the United States often distinguish between shopping as an expression of political voice and community and individualistic consumer behavior. This distinction animates a study of 20th century consumer society in America by historian Lizbeth Cohen. Cohen describes two “ideal-typical” models of consumer behavior that have appeared in the discourse of politicians, activists and consumers themselves. In the model of the “citizen consumer,” shoppers “were regarded as responsible for safeguarding the general good of the nation, in particular for prodding the government to protect the rights, safety and fair treatment of individual consumers in the private marketplace” through organized, collective action (Cohen, 2003, p. 18). In contrast to the citizen consumer, what Cohen calls “purchaser consumers ... were viewed as contributing to the larger society more by exercising purchasing power than through asserting themselves politically” and were assumed to act on the basis of individualistic needs and desires (Cohen, 2003, p. 19). Miller similarly distinguishes between “citizen-consumers” and “rational consumers” in her analysis of the marketing campaigns of independent bookstores (Miller, 2006). Studies of contemporary market-based social movements, such as the anti-sweatshop movement and the Fair Trade movement, empirically investigate the efforts of social movement organizations to mobilize purchasing power in the service of social change

(Frank, 2003; Levi & Linton, 2003; Linton, Liou, & Shaw, 2004; Prasad, Kimeldorf, Meyer, & Robinson, 2004).

As I explained in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, several scholars have argued that the organic industry encourages consumers to think of themselves as active, publicly engaged citizens. Goodman and DuPuis describe the market for organic foods as an “arena of contention” shaped by the claims of activists, government authorities and food corporations (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002, p. 17). DuPuis argues that consumers respond to these debates by collectively pushing to increase the availability of products that they believe are safer, such as hormone-free organic milk (DuPuis, 2000). Allen and Kovach argue that organic foods retail stores, in particular, “provide spaces where [consumers] committed to organic agriculture can meet for political work” (Allen & Kovach, 2000, p. 229).

On the other hand, the “vocabularies of motive” of industry professionals, which I analyzed in Chapter 4, suggest a more mixed expectation. As I described, most of the professionals offered reasons for participating in the organic industry that appealed to conceptions of the greater good of society and particularly emphasized protecting the environment. However, they offered different accounts of what environmental protection would entail. Humanistic, “crisis of culture” accounts of environmental protection described it as contingent on the transformation of the values and consciousness of individuals in society. From this perspective, consumers would have to become engaged and aware of the broader impact of their purchasing activities in order to create a more sustainable society. Accounts based on the ideas of efficient

environmentalism offered a different point of view. In these accounts, only the impact of consumer decisions mattered; the motivations of consumers were unimportant. As one trade group representative who presented the motives of the industry in terms of efficient environmentalism asked:

Does it really matter to me or to the Organic Trade Association why somebody is choosing that product? Not really. Because whenever they choose that product they are sending an economic message that we want farming that is done with the environment in mind. Whether the person who buys it realizes that or not might not make that much difference. It might make a difference, but, really, if you buy it because it tastes good, great! If you buy it because it is helping the environment, great! That's fine. It ultimately all ends up helping the environment.⁹⁰

This industry member argued that it does not matter at all why customers pick out organic products because these purchases have the same effect whatever motivations lie behind them. Even if customers do not realize that they are doing so, their purchases of organic food send a “message that we want farming that is done with the environment in mind.” The explanation that this industry member offers parallels Cohen’s purchaser consumer model. In this case, the aggregate of consumer purchases are helping the environment, not the national economy. However, the logic of focusing on the aggregate impact of individualistically-motivated purchases is identical.

The consolidation and rationalization of the organic industry also calls into question the place of the citizen consumer in the organic industry. In Chapter 3, I showed that even organizations founded on participatory ideals face enormous pressures from market competition that have led them in many cases to redefine the

⁹⁰ Interview, December 7, 2006.

meaning of participation and to loosely couple participatory discourse to actual organizational practice. Similarly, in Chapter 2, I showed that the organic regulations tend to direct the activism of industry members into institutionalized channels. These findings suggest that citizen consumption, in the form of organized, collective, and critical action, may not be prominent in the organic industry.

To pursue these questions, this chapter empirically investigates how professionals in the organic industry “frame” the role of consumers (Goffman, 1974). I have organized this investigation into two parts. First, I examine the cognitive frames that professionals use to understand how consumers make their shopping decisions. I explain that the professionals often rely on concepts of health, convenience and emotion to frame consumer motivations in more or less individualistic terms. In other words, many professionals think that few, if any, consumers who buy organic foods view their purchases primarily as part of a collective effort to save the environment. Second, I analyze how members of the industry present organic foods to customers. I argue that both members of national organic foods companies and professionals at smaller, participatory co-ops limit the extent to which they frame the purchase of organic foods as an act of citizen consumption. The limitations are more frustrating to members of co-ops, who more frequently argue that the organic foods industry has a responsibility to create cultural change. Members of national companies, by contrast, sometimes actively oppose the suggestion that consumers should participate in industry decisions as an organized group.

Professionals' cognitive frames

Health versus the environment

One way that professionals in the organic industry conceptualize consumers' motivations to purchase organic products is by contrasting the motivations of consumers who buy organic to protect the environment with those who consume organic foods to improve their health and to protect the health of their families. In this framework, professionals tend to present consumers that are concerned for the environment as public-minded people who buy organic products because they contribute to the greater good of society rather than because they bring a direct benefit to the individual. By contrast, professionals portray health-motivated consumers as a more peripherally interested in the public good and as focused on the wellbeing of themselves and their families. Professionals also tend to explain that health-motivated consumers are much more common. One marketing manager who entered the organic industry with an MBA and now works for a national brand explained to me how this way of thinking contributes to her work.

Well, we know we're usually asking consumers to pay more for our version of the product and sometimes the products look absolutely identical: the conventional and the organic. Maybe they taste identical. So we are asking them to make this giant leap of faith. They are staring at two identical apples. Why would they choose the more expensive one? There has to be, one, a key understanding of what motivates people to do that. What are the drivers? What's so important to this mom that she's going to take a family's scarce resources and give more of them to a store ... From a consumer perspective we know that the environment is not the number one driver when a consumer is right at

that moment of purchase. It is like Maslow's hierarchy. People are going to be trying to look for something closer in, satisfying those needs first. And if it is a mother who feels protective of her children's health, that ranks a lot higher than the more abstract concept of protecting the environment. So that is going to drive things.⁹¹

The health-motivated consumer that this successful marketer describes is an individualistic market agent that resembles Cohen's purchaser-consumer. Using the example of a consumer's decision at the point of purchase, she paints a picture of an isolated shopper deliberating between two "absolutely identical" products on the supermarket shelf. She seems to assume that this hypothetical shopper has little knowledge of the specific differences between organic and conventional agriculture or of the history of the organic foods movement. The cultural resources that this shopper has at her disposal to distinguish between the quality of different products, such as appearance and taste, cannot help her understand the differences between the organic and the conventional product. She also implies that the shopper has few social relationships, other than those that connect her to her immediate family, which would affect her decision in the supermarket. Finally, the manager assumes that the shopper makes her decision on the basis of a calculation that weighs "a family's scarce resources" against the benefits that might result from the decision to purchase organic foods.

The perspective that this marketing manager uses leads her to sort consumers' motivations related to health and the environment into separate categories in order to craft a marketing message that will rank highly in the hypothetical shopper's

⁹¹ Interview, April 10, 2007.

“hierarchy”. She explains that the message needs to appeal to closely-held “needs,” such as the shopper’s personal health or the health of her family. In contrast to these needs, the notion that her purchase of organic foods contributes to the quality of the environment may appear “abstract” and is less likely to drive her decision. Although this professional later explained that, “we know that environmental concerns are absolutely on the list and it is protection of the farm environment that yields a healthier product,” she did not change her assertion that most consumers make the decision to buy organic foods because they believe these products will directly improve their health and the health of their families. For example, she explained that beginning a family and growing older, which are two experiences that she connected with increased concerns about personal health and the health of significant others, often brought consumers into the organic market:

[Mothers] are a very important segment of the market because childbirth and pregnancy is one of the key entry points for organic consumers. For empty nesters, it is usually either a health crisis or a perceived health crisis to get people who are empty nesters to be thinking about it.⁹²

The cognitive frame that this professional uses to make sense of consumers’ motivations relies on an assumption about consumers’ understanding of the relationship between health and the environment. She implies that consumers view spending money to protect the environment as an activity that has little direct impact on their lives. In other words, she suggests that although consumers perceive that risks from toxic pollutants in the environment may harm their health, they do not think that

⁹² Interview, April 10, 2007.

their purchase of organic foods will benefit them by reducing the pollutants in the environment as a whole. Instead, she explains that consumers see organic foods as a way to protect themselves, as individuals, from the risks posed by pollutants and from the unhealthy characteristics of conventional foods. Metaphorically, organic foods are understood to create a wall between consumers' families and a risky environment. In her own words, she believes "that consumers are feeling newly empowered to change their health through the foods that they eat." As she explains, this assumption shapes the way she presents organic foods to consumers in her work:

I think that consumers need to understand that organic is what happens at the farm and organic is the way food is grown. And that they should care how their food is grown and they should ask questions about how it was grown and where it is from and that in general the more closely connected you are to how food is grown, the more in control of your health you'll be. And that you really are, you do have an insurance policy against a lot of nasty stuff that is being used out there on fields. And I think it is ok to put it that way. It doesn't mean you have a gridiron, eat organic and you'll live forever, but it really gives you the ability to avoid a lot of stuff that people want to avoid.⁹³

This marketing professional's rhetoric of "drivers" and "Maslow's hierarchy" is probably drawn in important ways from her professional business training and her experience as a marketer for a large food corporation. However, even those professionals without this experience made similar assumptions about organic consumers' understandings of the relationships between environmental protection and personal health. For example, the owner of a small chain of natural foods grocery stores described his clientele in similar terms:

I think that there are a lot of our consumers that lean [towards

⁹³ Interview, April 10, 2007.

environmental concerns]. Then there are others that have their own reasons for choosing organic food, probably mostly having to do with believing that it is going to benefit them personally more in terms of their own health, but it is not necessarily about making the world a better place or preserving the environment. I would guess that the majority of our customers care about preserving the environment but it is a wide variation of degree. In other words, maybe fifteen to twenty percent of our customers shop at our store because of their concerns about the environment. Then there is probably another fifty to sixty percent -- these are just wild guesses -- that care about the environment but more so they care about themselves and that is why they choose to shop in our stores. And then there is that remaining twenty to thirty percent that basically it's all about themselves and not about the environment.⁹⁴

Like the national marketer, this small business owner sorts his customers' concerns about the environment and their concerns about personal health into different conceptual categories. He explains that those customers who are interested in "preserving the environment" also view their purchase of organic foods as "about making the world a better place." In contrast, health-motivated shoppers care more about how organic foods are "going to benefit them personally." Significantly, this entrepreneur explains that a portion of his health-motivated customers see no connection between the personal benefits of organic foods and the larger notion of an improved environment. For these shoppers, "basically it's all about themselves and not about the environment." Even those who combine environmental and health motivations hold these motivations separately: "they care about the environment but more so they care about themselves" rather than viewing a less risky environment as a way to directly improve their own health. This business owner also believes that only a minority – at most twenty percent – of his customers buy organic foods in order to

⁹⁴ Interview, June 23, 2006.

contribute to an improved environment.

Convenience

In addition to concerns about personal health and environmental protection, professionals also mention that increasing convenience and availability drive consumer purchases of organic foods. As in descriptions of consumers purchasing organic foods for personal health reasons, discussions of the convenience and availability of organic foods present consumers as individualistic and self-interested market agents. The education and outreach director of a successful natural foods co-op offers one example:

I think people are aware of, you know, depending on what part of town I am in I can shop and get natural products at any one of four or five different places. In our customer surveys, we've documented that most of our customers do shop elsewhere as well. We don't have a 100% loyalty concept where people are like, if I am a member of the co-op, I am only shopping at the co-op. We know that is unrealistic first of all because we don't carry fresh meat, for example, and people are going to have to go somewhere else to get that. But also the reality of it is that people are very busy ... People are going to shop where they are when they need something and maybe come to the co-op for their weekly run or their bi-weekly run and get big amounts of groceries, but we are not naive in thinking that everyone is going to come to the co-op for everything.⁹⁵

This co-op director credits the expansion of the organic foods industry with increasing the number of stores in the co-op's market where people can buy natural products. While this may cause more customers to buy organic foods, it also increases the competition that her co-op faces from other stores. She acknowledges this and

⁹⁵ Interview, April 18, 2006.

explains that it would be “unrealistic” to believe that customers have a “100% loyalty concept” to the co-op. Although the co-op itself did not carry meat because its founders were committed to eating vegetarian diets, she does not expect co-op shoppers to avoid eating meat.⁹⁶ In addition, she notes that the customers are “busy” and that they will be more likely to shop “where they are when they need something” than they are to come out of their way to buy something at the co-op. She assumes that shoppers make decisions on the basis of their evaluation of immediate, individualistic needs rather than on the basis of social relationships with a particular organization or commitment to an idea such as the co-operative model of economic organization.

Other professionals contrasted consumers’ desire for convenience with the commitment of organizations within the organic industry to broader goals, such as environmental protection. Speaking of co-op stores in general, the marketing manager that I quoted above explained:

There’s only so much people are willing to sacrifice, and I listed some of that earlier. Having to drive a long distance. Having to pay more money, first of all, is the very first area people are going to encounter. And little independents have all of that, they have all of those issues to contend with. They are usually very hard to maneuver in the store, they have a cramped space. That is a cost, that’s a cost for me if I have to keep banging my cart into things. It’s a cost for me if I can’t find a parking spot. It’s a cost if I have to drive over across town because they don’t have any razors for my husband, so I can’t make it a one stop shop for even basic items. So what’s happening right now is that many hard-core co-ops have dug in and decided, we are who we are. We’re reflecting the real cost of food here. If you can’t get it here we have good reasons why ... [laughs] That’s great that you get to protect that watershed outside your door, but I don’t have a place to park my car. That’s not going to fly in five years, because Whole Foods will come in

⁹⁶ At the time of the research, the management of this co-op had just completed a survey of its members and was considering installing a meat department.

and have a beautiful store that makes people feel great while they are shopping and they won't have to have given up so much to shop there.⁹⁷

This manager employs the rhetoric of costs and benefits to identify factors that are leading consumers to reject co-ops and turn to other, more convenient places to buy organic foods, such as the national chain Whole Foods Market. Nearly all of the costs that she mentions have to do with the personal convenience of shoppers, such as driving a long distance, finding few parking spots and store aisles that are not wide enough to maneuver a shopping cart, and having to make an additional stop to buy necessary personal items. In her view, the potential benefits that such inconvenient stores might bring to society at large, such as refusing to expand a parking lot in order to protect a watershed, will not balance out the costs for most shoppers. She also portrays stores that advocate environmental goals over the personal convenience of shoppers as stubborn, somewhat adversarial organizations that “dig in” and proclaim that “if you can't get [what you want] here we have good reasons why.” She explains that a more successful organization, such as Whole Foods Market, will make shopping convenient for customers and will also make them “feel great” while buying their groceries.

⁹⁷ Interview, April 10, 2007.

Emotions and lifestyles

For years, people said, "Consumers don't know what organic means." We knew that. But we also knew that consumers didn't care! They just wanted to feel good that they were doing the right thing.

Harvey Hartman (qtd. Fromartz, 2006, p. 241)

In addition to personal experience and academic training, professionals in the organic industry also rely on books and articles written by professional market researchers to understand consumer behavior.⁹⁸ The growth of the organic foods industry has posed an interesting question for professional market researchers: why are more and more people willing to pay more for products that seem to have few obvious differences from their conventional counterparts? Instead of talking mainly about personal health and convenience as did my respondents, these marketers emphasize the importance of consumers' emotions and lifestyle aspirations in models of purchasing behavior. They also explain that changes in the organization of retail markets shape consumer behavior. Therefore, these market researchers tend to portray consumers less like calculating market actors than do some of my respondents in the organic industry. Neither do the market researchers portray consumers as public-minded citizen-consumers who view their purchases of organic food as a way to

⁹⁸ These marketers and their work appeared throughout the industry during my research. In particular, professionals who work for smaller, independent organizations are paying attention to market research as they work to develop a competitive position in the industry. In 2002, a dual keynote at the Consumer Cooperative Managers Association featured talks by activist Frances Moore Lappe and marketer Harvey Hartman. The National Cooperative Grocers Association has also begun to introduce the work of professional market researchers into the "alternative" world of co-ops and independent businesses. The NCGA has worked with the Hartman group on a project to develop a co-op "brand" and uses the Hartman model to understand the opportunities for co-ops in the changing marketplace.

improve society or the environment. Instead, these marketers view consumers' behavior as oriented towards cultural icons or small groups of significant others who share a lifestyle. This section illustrates market researchers' understanding of emotion and lifestyle in consumer behavior by analyzing one representative text.⁹⁹

The text is *Marketing in the Soul Age* by Harvey Hartman, the founder and president of The Hartman Group, a retail consulting firm located near Seattle, Washington. This firm began from an effort to study consumer behavior related to natural products consumption. As one member of this organization explained,

The Hartman Group started out in the health and wellness industry and our clients have largely been folks in the industry, folks that are looking for market consulting and market research. Initially a lot of the clients were folks like Glaxo and SmithKleinBecham who were actually you might say simply amazed that Americans would buy in huge numbers something like echinacea, which to them, as scientists, had no proven effect. They didn't believe that people would do this. They thought it was irrational. And so they had come to us to understand how perfectly rational people could do something so stupid. If that was the case, how could they make money too?¹⁰⁰

More recently, the Hartman Group's interest in "irrational" consumer behavior has led to studies of the organic foods market, several of which were mentioned by my informants in the industry. These studies focus on shifts in culture and social organization that they argue drive the growth of these new product markets.

⁹⁹ Analysis of marketing texts presents a methodological problem not often discussed in the literature: price. Because texts are based on proprietary research and oriented towards a market of firms, they are usually priced far beyond the means of any individual. For example, the Hartman Group's most recent report on the organic market, *The Many Faces of Organic 2008*, has a price tag of \$15,000.00. However, the Hartman Group (and other marketers) also publish non-proprietary, general purposes accounts of their methodology and understanding of consumer behavior. My source is one such text. Although different in detail, this text shares the themes of emotion and lifestyle with several other recent marketing books that I examined during this study.

¹⁰⁰ Interview, March 10, 2006.

According to Hartman, established models of market research, which assume the existence of a mass market of value conscious consumers with “relatively undifferentiated needs,” are completely inadequate to the task of understanding contemporary consumer behavior (Hartman, 2001, p. 14). Instead, he argues, large numbers of consumers, particularly those that are highly educated, have developed individualized patterns of consumption that may seem contradictory to an observer who assumes that rational calculations of utility drive purchasing decisions. Hartman offers the examples such as “the man who runs five miles a day and celebrates the accomplishment with a cigarette ... [and] the new mother who buys only organic for her baby but doesn’t eat organic herself” (p. 10). He argues that these new consumption patterns have driven the market success of niche designer retail stores, such as Pottery Barn and REI, and of product categories such as natural health treatments, specialty beer and organic foods. It is these patterns that the market researcher needs to understand.

Hartman conceptualizes consumption as a social activity that involves the consumer in communities or “lifestyle worlds”. These communities are private groups bound by a shared lifestyle, rather than groups of diverse citizens connected by concerns about public issues. Emotions, such as a desire to belong and to fit into these groups, drive consumption at the individual level. Hartman conceptualizes lifestyle worlds as a set of concentric circles. At the core of each lifestyle world are consumers that are deeply invested in the activities of the world. The mid-level market lacks the deep personal investment of core consumers in the world's activities but identifies with

these paragons at the center of the world. Building on the case of the outdoor recreation world, Hartman explains:

A lightweight, titanium-shank hiking boot was developed to solve particular problems encountered by mountaineers who operate on the highest level of that sport, yet it's something that people who participate in the middle or periphery of the world can buy too. They may not really need it, but it makes them feel as though they are bona fide members of the world if they buy a pair and wear them. The point, though, is this: They don't want the boots; they want what the boots represent, which is membership in a lifestyle even if they cannot function at the core of the mountaineering world. (Hartman, 2001)

Thinking of the market in terms of lifestyle worlds that surround consumers' decisions and activities makes sense, Hartman argues, in light of broad changes in American society and culture. The most important shift for Hartman has taken place in the realm of culture: the culture of "reason" in the United States has given way to what he calls a culture of "soul". For Hartman, the "soul age" connotes a turn towards authentic and intense experiences on the part of consumers. The overall effect of this cultural shift is a market situation where "economic power and profits won't likely emanate from economies of scale, production efficiencies and manufacturing concerns. Instead, retailers, merchandisers, and designers will likely be driving the successful branding campaigns -- and revenue streams -- of the experience economy" (51). In other words, this cultural shift has created opportunities for retailers who sell experiences that connect with consumers on an emotional and experiential level as well as products that appeal to them on a functional level.

Hartman's model of consumer behavior influences the discussion of organic food that he includes in the book. Drawing on the concepts of emotion, experience and

culture, he argues that organic foods appear to be of higher quality, and are thus worth a premium price in the minds of consumers, as a result of “consumers’ longing to overcome their feeling of disconnection from the natural world” (Hartman, 2001, p. 62). Organic foods possess this compelling “mystique,” Hartman argues, because they enable consumers to connect symbolically with pre-industrial practices. The “technologizing” of food in the twentieth century has cast food products and the act of consuming them adrift from “the ordinary processes by which food is produced” (p. 61). Organic foods are culturally compelling because they enable people to feel connected to the processes of planting and harvest and life and death that bring food from the natural world to human consumption without actually disrupting consumers’ modern lives. He concludes:

When we struggle to define what we mean by quality in relation to organic food, it’s important not to lose sight of what can only be described as the sacramental dimension of food ... The producers and retailers of organic food would do well to remember that in the midst of all their discussions of growth, economies of scale, and legitimacy of technique, the real value of what they provide their customers goes well beyond its being a mere object of consumption. (Hartman, 2001, p. 63)

I do not intend to evaluate the accuracy or design of Hartman’s model here. Instead, I will discuss how this model relates to the distinction between public-minded citizen-consumers and individualistic purchaser-consumers. Earlier in this chapter, I showed that many organic professionals describe consumers as individualistic actors driven by personal needs such as health and convenience. By considering lifestyle communities and culture, Hartman offers a more social model of consumer behavior. However, his model differs from the citizen-consumer model in two main ways.

First, the forms of consumer association that Hartman describes are voluntary and diverse. For example, consumers may decide to join a community devoted to organic foods, to mountain climbing, or to wine tasting, just to name a few examples. Hartman also argues that consumers circulate among different lifestyle communities as their interests and social networks change. By contrast, Cohen's model of the citizen-consumer presents defense of the consumer's rights in the marketplace as the main purpose for associations of consumers. She also argues that citizen-consumers feel an obligation to join together in these groups as part of civic duty. Such affiliations are not voluntary and transitory as in Hartman's model. They are part of responsible civic life.

Second, the groups that appear in Cohen's model of citizen-consumers engage in political activity. The lifestyle communities that Hartman describes come together for purposes that are primarily expressive (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). While Cohen's work described citizen-consumer groups during the 1930s and 1960s as lobbying state and federal governments for product quality standards and equal rights to consume, Hartman sees groups primarily as engaged in discovering and talking about new experiences. In the case of organic foods, he argues, consumers do not see consumption as an activity that contributes to an improved environment, but rather as a way to reconnect with meaningful experiences that they feel are missing from their lives.

Although Hartman frames consumer behavior in less individualistic terms than many of the professionals that I interviewed, he emphasizes that consumers pursue

mainly personal satisfaction rather than broader, public good. I now turn to an analysis of the ways that professionals connect organic foods and broader goals in their relationships with consumers.

Mainstream campaigns and incremental increase

A discrepancy exists between professionals' understanding and representation of their own work and their attribution of individualistic motivations to consumers. As I explained in the previous chapter, professionals tend to use images of the public good, such as the image of an environment in need of saving, to talk about their own commitments to the organic industry and to create moral boundaries both within and around the industry. However, they doubt that many of their consumers share these concerns about the public good, or, at least, are willing to act on them. How, then, do professionals connect their understandings of the importance of organic foods to the individualistic motivations of consumers?

One way that professionals make these connections is through campaigns to incrementally increase consumers' purchases of organic foods. Rather than giving consumers the sense that anything less than wholesale commitment to organic foods is a failure, these campaigns encourage consumers to gradually increase their purchases of organic foods and to set personal goals for the amount of organic foods that they buy.

The theme of incremental increase appears in one important campaign directed

by the Organic Center for Research and Education, which was founded by the Organic Trade Association. Because this campaign is designed by a trade group, not one particular company, it is meant to speak for and to benefit the entire industry. The title of the campaign is Mission Organic 2010. When a consumer visits this campaign's website, she is greeted by a picture of a young boy holding up a shiny, red (presumably organic) apple next to the campaign's slogan: "Small choices can have a big impact".¹⁰¹ The intrigued consumer may scroll down to find another photograph of a barrel of apples, this time prominently labeled with the green and white "USDA Organic" seal and an exhortion to "Join the mission: Eat (at least) 10% organic." As an industry-wide campaign, Mission Organic 2010 seeks to recruit consumers to the goal of increasing the amount of organic sales and expanding the organic industry. The campaign asks consumers to "pledge" to purchase at least one organic item out of every ten items on grocery shopping trips and to use organic ingredients in at least one out of every ten home-prepared meals through the year 2010. Consumers who sign up online to join this campaign receive a starter kit and a "pocket pesticide reference guide" and have their first name and home state added to a public list of members of the Mission Organic 2010 "community."

By framing the organic industry as a collective project led by consumers as well as professionals, Mission Organic 2010 goes some distance towards interpreting consumption as a form of engaged citizenship, as in Cohen's model of the citizen consumer. The campaign also explains that, collectively, consumers pledges will have

¹⁰¹ The website is www.mo2010.com.

a "big impact" on public problems of health and environmental protection. By clicking on the link that asks, "What do my choices mean?" consumers may learn that if 10% of products sold in the United States were made organically, this would "eliminate pesticides from 98 million daily servings of U.S. drinking water ... assure 53 million daily servings of pesticide free fruits and vegetables (enough for ten million kids to have five daily servings) ... [and] fight climate change by capturing an additional 6.5 billion pounds of carbon in soil."

Nevertheless, this campaign also treats consumption as an individualistic act in several important ways. First, consumers are asked to monitor their own purchases without interference or support from others. They are not, for example, asked to post updates on their progress towards the ten percent goal on the website, nor does the campaign sponsor any discussion forums or other ways for consumer members to interact with one another. Second, consumer members are not asked to participate in discussions about the direction of the organic industry. The form of public participation enabled by this campaign is limited to a single act: the initial pledge. Consumers are invited to send comments when they pledge, but the campaign determines whether or not the comments are posted where other members can see them (at the present time, no consumer comments are posted on the campaign's website).

Although national industry campaigns for incremental increase invite consumers to participate in the growth of the organic industry and in achieving the public goals sought by many of its members, my interviews revealed that many

industry professionals are wary of allowing consumers to participate too closely in the politics of organics. Professionals worry that debates among industry members about the content of the organic standards and the practices of certain companies involved in organic production and retailing may confuse consumers and damage the credibility of the organic industry. Many professionals believe that these debates should only occur in private settings, or, if they are conducted in public, should follow conventions that to minimize their impact on consumers.

An example of this tendency appeared at a seminar that I attended at the Natural Products Expo West in 2007. The participants in this seminar, all experienced and highly placed members of the organic industry, led a discussion about debates over access to pasture in organic dairy operations. This is a contentious debate within the industry because of the profitability of the organic milk market. While the National Organic Program standards require that organic dairy cows have “access” to fresh pasture on which to graze, the rules do not specify how many days of the year cows should have such access or what proportion of their diet must come from fresh pasture as opposed to grain or hay. This has enabled large, grain-based dairy operations to produce organic milk for lower cost than small, pasture-based farms and to undercut these farms in the market (Fromartz, 2006). Representatives of small farms have therefore pushed for a stricter definition of “access” to be written into the national standards. In the question and answer period, I asked the members of the panel to explain how a retailer should respond to a consumer who asked for an explanation of the debates. The panel members agreed that retailers should not try to explain the

debates to consumers but should emphasize instead that each evolution of the organic standards increases the security and integrity of organic products. One of the panel members added to this response in a later interview when I asked about debates about pasturing requirements for organic dairy cows:

I think that, if a consumer asks, the explanation would be what we talked about earlier, which is that the National Organic Standards Board is working on definitions about pasturing, but at the moment, all of the dairy we sell in our store meets or exceeds the guidelines set forth by the USDA. Those guidelines are pretty nebulous at the moment and they are working on clarifying those and we will monitor that as it happens. There is not much else that can be said at this point.

MH: Do you think that for the sake of the industry and for these success of companies within the organic industry, is it important for consumers to know about what goes on behind the scenes and to have an understanding of the different stakes or sides in these debates?

No, I think it is completely detrimental for consumers to understand that. I think that they need to be able to trust the USDA organic seal. I think that the infighting again just goes to confuse consumers. If a consumer really wants to know, they can dig in and find out and there is always the ability to do that, especially in our world of the internet. There is plenty of information and there is plenty of misinformation abundant on the internet about the National Organic Standards and about this whole debate.¹⁰²

This professional contrasted the goal of consumer trust in organics with the ongoing debates in the industry. In her view, consumers will be able to have confidence in organic products if retailers tell them that an authorized body that is in charge of organic regulations, such as the National Organic Standards Board, is working to maintain organic standards. Retailers can also encourage consumers to have confidence in the integrity of organic products by keeping an eye on these discussions

¹⁰² Interview, March 28, 2007.

and by making sure that their merchandise “meets or exceeds” the standards.

However, this professional does not suggest that consumers are able to participate in these debates in a productive way. Instead, she believes, the organic industry’s “infighting” will leave them confused and unwilling to trust the USDA’s organic program. She acknowledges that some consumers may seek out additional information on the debates, but does not suggest that organic consumers, as a whole, should influence these debates through collective action.

The emphasis on consumer trust rather than participation also reflects the professionalization of the industry and the specialization of knowledge about organics. Professionals explain that as the legal definitions and regulations governing organic production and handling have grown more complicated, ordinary consumers are more likely to misinterpret the meaning of organics. The diversity of opinions and statements about organic in the media and other public forums increases the potential for misinterpretation. One category manager for a major natural foods grocery chain explained:

It’s very important to remember that we are at a very early stage in public awareness. That is why the public now is fairly gullible to smoke and mirrors ... I was traveling on the plane and talking to a woman who actually was very well educated and sort of our demographic and yet she was unsure of whether she could trust organic produce at a conventional retailer. And I mean, at one level, it is kind of a nice question but on another level it shows a misunderstanding of what organic regulations are. In other words, she thought that there was maybe, like if she bought an organic stickered apple at Safeway it wasn’t reliably organic the way that apple would be at Wild Oats and Whole Foods. Part of me is glad that they are putting a hairy eyeball to the conventional foods supermarkets but really, that organic sticker means that that piece of produce is the same no matter who sells it. And so it shows again that even on a simple issue like whether organic

certification means what it says there is still a lack of information out there and consumers you know, don't necessarily know to trust the USDA seal.¹⁰³

This professional describes consumers as “fairly gullible” and potentially misinformed about the National Organic Program’s rules and the meaning of the USDA Organic seal. He presents consumers as deficient in information that would allow them to participate productively in debates about industry’s direction. In other words, consumers, such as the woman that he met on the airplane, are playing catch-up and cannot make a contribution to the industry’s broad, environmentalist goals except through their purchases. Although he explains that “part of me is glad that [consumers] are putting a hairy eyeball” to the mainstream foods industry, this does not suggest that he would welcome consumer participation in organic industry debates. He seems to be suggesting that consumers should follow the principle of “buyer beware,” rather than engaging in collective action or pushing for food industry regulation as concerned citizens.

Seeking citizen-consumers in natural foods co-ops

Models of consumer behavior that emphasize individualistic motivations such as personal health and convenience or emotions and lifestyle aspirations do not fit easily with the ideas of members of natural foods co-ops. As I explained in Chapter 3, these co-ops developed in the 1960s and 1970s as collective organizations based on

¹⁰³ Interview, April 5, 2007.

member participation for non-selfish reasons. Although members of co-ops have changed many of their early practices in order to compete in a changing market, they have interpreted these changes in ways that maintain a participatory organizational identity. In addition, members of co-ops frequently articulate a “crisis of culture” version of environmentalism when talking about the organic industry’s purpose. As Chapter 4 showed, this version relies on changes in culture and institutions as a way to bring about environmental improvement. Some co-op members extend these notions of cultural and institutional change to include customers. For example, one co-op manager explained about her store’s customers:

I think that at our store, there is a very moral component. People come to our store because it is a vegetarian store. There is a spiritual aspect too. Their belief system about how to treat less verbal beings on the planet. So I would say that those are the reasons. And then, philosophically, people like the idea of a co-op. We have people that shop with us because of the economic model ... Owned by the customers, you know. And governed from the community.¹⁰⁴

This account of customer motivations is different from the more individualistic explanations that I described above. She points out that customers at her store define the significance of their vegetarian diets not in reference to their own health, but in terms of the benefits it brings for the “less verbal beings on the planet,” such as cows, pigs, chickens and other livestock. In addition, they choose to shop at the co-op because they support an “economic model” that empowers customers and the community and represents an alternative to dominant models of food retailing.

However, co-op members also frequently noted that most consumers avoid

¹⁰⁴ Interview, October 10, 2005.

activities, such as membership meetings, where they do not receive direct, individual benefits. These meetings, which are open to the co-op's entire membership and are intended to allow people to socialize and learn about the store's activities, help to define co-ops as alternative, participatory organizations. One co-op membership coordinator complained:

We still have trouble getting people to turn out for meetings. They hate meetings even when we give them free food. Even when we treat them to dinner and have a band, people will come for the dinner and the band and not show up for the meeting ... If we are lucky maybe we will get 75 or 100 people at a meeting and out of fourteen thousand [members], that's not great. Like we just had our thirtieth birthday bash. Well, we served close to a thousand meals but we only had about a hundred people at the meeting. People didn't come to the meeting but they came for the barbecue and the dance band after the meeting!¹⁰⁵

This co-op coordinator distinguishes between consumer participation in co-op meetings, which is a form of participation with little direct individual benefit, and participation in the dinner and dance events that accompany the meetings. The problem that she faces is that the organization depends on members to participate in the meetings for the collective good of the co-op, but only a few do so. She interprets the behavior of members as evidence that they will only participate when they receive a direct benefit, such as a meal or entertainment, that has little connection to the purpose of the meeting itself. This challenges the co-op's effort to constitute itself as an alternative form of economic organization.

¹⁰⁵ Interview, March 12, 2007.

Political engagement in co-ops

The fact that most co-op members do not act like citizen-consumers limits the extent to which co-ops, as organizations, take public positions on political issues. As one co-op manager put it,

The goal is that we want to be a place for expression, for our members and our communities, to be tolerant and accept all viewpoints. And perhaps we're an area where folks can come and as part of their shopping and as part of their lives enter into dialogues with one another as part of the space. But in terms of the co-op taking a position, no, we don't do that ... No, that's not our role here. Now people go to the board of directors all the time, wanting them to sign on this, wanting the co-op to take a position on that, and it is very rare that the board will put their name on something, will put the organization's name on some petition for this, that and the other.¹⁰⁶

This co-op manager hints at consumer engagement in civic issues when he explains that he wants to the store to help people with different viewpoints “enter into dialogues with one another.” However, he is careful to define the store as a place for expression, rather than for political activity.

Store managers also mentioned financial survival when talking about their refusal to take public positions on political issues. Nearly all of the independent professionals that I spoke to about political activity explained that they had a broad and diverse base of customers and that taking a stand on an issue that would please some customers would certainly alienate others, which could hurt the organization in a competitive market. The professionals spoke of making their stores into "a neutral place" and of "having the welcome mat out" for customers of all political leanings.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, February 20, 2007.

While the professionals especially avoided giving the impression that they supported particular political candidates or political parties, even seemingly innocuous issues could cause problems. As one store manager recounted:

We had an open space bond a number of years ago and people came over and wanted us to sell the tee shirts that they were using to raise money ... I thought well, probably most people are for that, and the very first day those t-shirts went out, I had three complaints. You just don't know! You think that something might be benign and it's not. We do have a customer that is walking through those doors probably on every side of the issue.¹⁰⁷

For this manager, even selling tee shirts to raise money to preserve undeveloped land in her town caused a negative reaction amongst some of her customers.

I observed a similar episode during my field research at a natural foods co-op. One of the co-op's members, who also happened to be an elected representative on the city council, sent a letter to the board asking them to cease carrying a local newspaper. This member explained that the newspaper's publisher had used proceeds from advertising in the paper to support a state ballot measure to restrict abortion services to minors. She argued that by carrying this paper, the co-op was complicit with an effort to pass a law that violated its principles of democracy and equality. The board took this request seriously, discussed it at several monthly meetings, and even contacted the managers of other co-ops in the region to find out if they had ever faced a similar situation and how they had handled it. Finally, the board resolved the issue by declining the request and continuing to carry the paper. In discussions, they offered three reasons. First, the issue of abortion was not connected to the organization's core

¹⁰⁷ Interview, May 16, 2006.

concerns about food and the environment. Second, they did not want to censor a publication because of the beliefs and activities of its owner, although they had in the past removed publications because of their content. Specifically, the store manager referred to a publication produced by the gay community that had content which did not suit a "family" store. In the case of the local newspaper, the board recognized that some members used it to find out about local events and did not feel that it was fair to deprive them of its services. Third, the board did not want to take a stand on an issue, such as abortion rights, that would divide the membership.¹⁰⁸

One challenge that this avoidance of political positions creates for professionals who work at independent stores and co-ops is the need to distinguish their own political convictions from the official positions of the organization. This created a certain amount of cognitive dissonance for some of the professionals, particularly those who saw their decision to work in the organic industry as part of a larger environmentalist identity. One store manager, who explained that her goals of reducing the environmental impacts of agriculture had led her to work in a co-op, put it this way.

We don't want to alienate people. That's really what it is. We want Republicans who voted for Bush to think that they can come in here and buy organic food just like anyone else. Although in my heart I don't believe that they can be voting for Bush and believe in organics! Sorry. [pause] I mean, that is my personal opinion and I have board members who would not agree with me. So we do have people that are on both sides of the fence and we have customers who are different probably from most of us that work here.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ However, the board of this co-op funded and participated in campaigns to restrict planting genetically modified crops. Below, I discuss the distinction that co-op leaders make between food-related and non-food political issues.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, August 16, 2006.

This manager was torn between her sense that the pro-industry policies of the Bush administration contradict the environmentalist goals of the organic industry and her financial interest in not alienating any potential customers.

One way that professionals handle this situation is to distinguish between food-related issues, which they believe that their membership will allow them to take a stand on, and all other political issues. Thus, professionals who refuse to endorse political candidates or display any signs of political partisanship in their stores were very active in the public comment period in 1997 which resulted in the rejection of the first proposed organic standards. However, this segregation of issues, along with the personal convictions of professionals, may also create confusion, as one co-op manager explained.

I happen to be rabidly, rabidly political, personally. I really work to separate my own sentiments, for example, about the present administration or the resources that we're spending in Iraq. I see the impact of that daily, with people suffering from the high gas prices. I'm looking at people that make eight or nine dollars an hour, and what it takes to put another twenty dollars in their gas tank is really formidable. But I use the standard, just personally, that if I had a Bush supporter in my spot, using the resources of our co-op to promote that agenda, I would be insane. [laughs] I would be tearing the building apart! So I try not to take advantage of the resources to work my particular bias.

MH: So what makes an issue a co-op issue as opposed to a personal issue?

Those values. Organics, sustainability, vegetarianism, and cooperatives. So we try to stay on those. Feeding people, that's where we get a little crossover. Because we do believe that we have a responsibility, we have excess food, we have food that is going out of date, so we want to make sure it gets into the hands of people who can use it. But then there's the analysis of why do we have growing poverty. So it tends to

get a little grey right there. I discipline myself!¹¹⁰

This manager finds it difficult to separate "legitimate" issues tied to the co-op's values from ones that seem too partisan, such as the organization of the economy. She believes that it would be unethical to use the community's resources to promote a personal agenda, but the co-op's values, if logically pursued, lead to a critique of conservative politics.

The politics of stocking merchandise

Merchandise selection constitutes an important area where I observed co-op members negotiate between their perceptions that consumers' make shopping decisions mainly for individualistic reasons and their goal of creating alternative institutions of food production and distribution. For many co-op members, selection of merchandise not only symbolizes a commitment to personal health but also support for a decentralized and more environmentally-friendly food system. Many of the co-op members that I interviewed had developed merchandise standards that governed what they would and would not carry in their stores. Some stores singled out particular brands to exclude, such as dairy items made by Horizon Organic Dairy, or excluded items with a special significance. An example of the latter practice is one individual who explained that he refused to carry conventional strawberries in his store, which was located in an important strawberry-growing region of California, because people

¹¹⁰ Interview, October 10, 2005.

in his community were affected by methyl bromide, a toxic soil fumigant used in conventional strawberry cultivation. Other co-op members explained that their stores had a hierarchy of preferences and preferred to carry independently produced products over those produced by mainstream food companies.

However, these efforts by co-ops to determine their merchandise selection by reference to broader goals of social reform and institutional change usually also involved concessions to the individualistic motivations of some customers, such as the desire for convenience. In one of the co-ops where I conducted research, for example, the management made the decision to discontinue the Tom's of Maine brand of toothpaste after it was purchased by the Colgate-Palmolive manufacturing conglomerate. In a note to the store's members in the monthly newsletter, the management explained that Tom's of Maine had been one of the first brands of personal care items that the co-op had carried on its shelves because of the company's commitment to use only natural ingredients and to avoid testing its products on animals. The newsletter continued, "many members will hesitate to buy products from a parent company, such as Colgate-Palmolive, that has not committed to ending animal testing." Thus, the management justified their decision to stop carrying the product by referring to the non-individualistic goal of animal rights. However, the note in the newsletter concluded by saying that the co-op would special order the product for customers who specifically requested it. In effect, the co-op took the position that this product was not compatible with some members' goals of cultural and institutional change, but also made it possible for customers who wanted to buy the

product for personal reasons to continue to do so without too much inconvenience.

Co-op managers found themselves performing a similar balancing act when their customers differed on what products their stores should carry. Some stores experienced a situation where the bulk of consumers desired a particular product, but it offended the expectations of a minority of politically aware consumers. In these cases, store managers had to negotiate a compromise solution between different customer factions. According to one store manager:

the exceptions [to our standards] will be when members feel very strongly. We'll have some members who feel very strongly, for example, that we should not carry Odwalla because it's owned by Coke. And that stuff shouldn't be in here. So we did put up some signs that say, "Odwalla is a fine product of the Coca-Cola Company." Just to make people aware of that because we had some members who just didn't want to let that issue go.¹¹¹

In this instance, some members of the co-op disagreed with the store's decision to sell Odwalla juice products because of the practices or the structure of the brand's parent company, Coca-Cola.¹¹² The co-op manager explains that these members did not reject the product for individualistic reasons related to health or convenience. Instead, they took a public stand that the products of a mainstream company should not occupy shelf space in an organization devoted to creating alternatives to dominant institutions and practices in the food industry. The manager carefully notes that only some members took this position, while others continued to buy Odwalla. The store resolved

¹¹¹ Interview, February 20, 2007.

¹¹² The specifics of merchandise selection vary based on the market that each co-op is in and the political leanings of its customers. One more radical co-op manager explained, "We successfully discontinued Odwalla ... Odwalla as you may know is owned by Coca-Cola and a lot of their business practices we don't agree with, especially in South America where people have been assassinated using funds from Coca-Cola. That's pretty bad."

the conflict between different members' orientations towards the product by posting additional information for customers to consider when making their shopping decisions.

Co-op managers explained that they encountered similar challenges when store employees referred to environmental or political issues to criticize customers' decisions to buy certain products. One co-op education director offered this illustrative story:

It used to be, like back in the mid-eighties, the co-op finally after years started carrying canned tuna because enough people were like, I would really like to come to the co-op and buy canned tuna. But apparently there was this interesting vibe going on where the tuna was kept behind the counter, like on this little shelf, and you had to ask the cashier for the tuna. And then when you were given the tuna you were also given a bit of attitude about buying the tuna. It was really kind of weird and so we're getting away from that.¹¹³

In this case, the employees referred to environmental problems associated with tuna fishing practices to confront shoppers who decided to buy canned tuna. The co-op director views such practices as "kind of weird" in light of the store's responsiveness to its shoppers' desire for increased convenience. This co-op leader went on to explain that her store did not have the desire or the responsibility to tell people what they should be eating. Like the manager who informed his customers about the ownership structure of Odwalla, this educational director favored posting information to help people understand the public significance of their food choices. She continued:

We're not here to dictate what's good food and what's evil food and so forth. That's not what we're here to do. We can certainly provide information and say, like in the case of tuna, what we could have said

¹¹³ Interview, April 18, 2006.

is, hey, did you know that a percentage of fish that aren't tuna get caught by these nets and sea turtles are dying and things like that. Just letting you know that when you choose to eat this product you may be contributing to this kind of activity in the world. But not saying, we're not carrying tuna because it's spawn of Satan or whatever. We're not quite there.¹¹⁴

She explains that providing information to consumers about the effects of tuna fishing on sea turtles and other species of fish did not constitute “dictat[ing] what’s good food and what’s evil food,” whereas confronting shoppers about their decisions did cross this line. The strategy of providing information to the customer expands the range of costs and benefits that she is able to weigh in making a decision about a product by letting her know that her purchase of the tuna “may be contributing” to the death of turtles and the overharvesting of fish. However, once the consumer performs her personal calculations and determines whether or not these costs outweigh the benefits of buying the tuna, the employees of the store should not intervene, even if they believe that tuna (and the companies that produce it) are “spawn of Satan.”

Using education to connect consumer choices and civic activity

Members of co-ops described education and the provision of information, along the lines of these Odwalla and tuna examples, as a way to link customers’ motivations to the broader concerns of professionals and the mission of their organizations. In addition, these co-op members explained that education could give their stores a competitive edge in the market. For example, one co-op membership

¹¹⁴ Interview, April 18, 2006.

coordinator had been very active in the anti-toxics campaigns and the environmental movement during the 1980s and 1990s. When I interviewed her, she was involved in organizing several community events related to the 2007 Farm Bill, which was working its way through Congress at the time. In addition to local farmers, the panels included representatives from national food security and environmentalist organizations and well-known author Dan Imhaus. This professional also set up in-store tables with information about the FDA's approval of cloning in food production and the possibility of cloned organic foods in the co-op's stores. She argued that this work helped the store maintain its population of loyal customers:

I do believe that one of the things that helped maintain really strong loyalty to the co-op when the corporate natural foods chains, Wild Oats, Alfalfa's, Whole Foods, all started hitting the market in our region, one of the reasons that we didn't go under and that people still came to the co-op was that we had taken active stands and had done community organizing and build loyalty through sort of education and agit programs on food, health and environment related issues. So we've been an activist co-op since I have been here, twenty two years, and in part that has been my job and my passion and my role, to really educate the public on that and I think that really helped keep us in good stead in the market and I think that it still does.¹¹⁵

This energetic membership coordinator explicitly connected the co-op's efforts to educate customers about the broader effects of their food choices with the store's ability to maintain a stable base of customers in an increasingly competitive markets. Importantly, she portrayed educational work as a practice that transforms customers, organizes the community, and builds loyalty to the store. These ways of talking about education avoid the problems of confrontation between politically-minded store

¹¹⁵ Interview, March 12, 2007.

employees and customers motivated by individualistic needs. In addition, the membership coordinator's description of the connections that these "education and agit programs" create between the store and its customers differ from the purely individualistic model of consumer motivation driven by convenience and private health concerns.

Professionals also explained that educational programs served to market the store. One independent natural foods store owner explained that for his store, education "is a mission, because people don't know what all of the issues are and it is up to us to educate people. It also serves us because when people know about those things they are going to buy more of the goods that we are selling." Another co-op manager explained that education about products helped her small co-op compete in a market dominated by large chain stores that had begun to include natural foods in their product mix. As she put it, "they had fancier stores and more space and nicer, prettier bins, but they still couldn't do what we're doing, I think, which is being there at the customer level and being able to educate people about how to use it, what it is, what it's for. They just had it in bulk bins and if you wanted it you could buy it at the store."

Organic foods and the limits of consumption as politics

I began this chapter by describing an important contrast between orientations toward consumption that exists in consumer studies literature. At certain points in history and in certain arenas, members of the American public have related to

consumption as a form of political citizenship. However, they have also, and perhaps more frequently, interpreted consumption as an individualistic activity with little direct connection to the public good. Several scholars have argued that the organic foods industry offers new opportunities for engaged consumer citizenship. My analysis of data from interviews with industry professionals, marketing campaigns and marketing literature calls this assertion into question. Within the organic industry, consumers are frequently assumed to act from individualistic motivations and professionals are often reluctant to engage with them in debates about the future of the organic industry or about the relationship between food consumption and broader patterns of social inequality and political power.

In the final section of this chapter, I contextualize these findings within broader discussion of critiques of consumption. To do this, I depart from close analysis of data and examine work on consumer citizenship in the organic industry on a theoretical level. First, I examine the critique that stems from critical theory, especially the work of Habermas. This critique clarifies some of the assumptions built into the concept of consumer citizenship and some of the difficulties of promoting citizenship in the context of a competitive market. Second, I turn to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and his critique of taste. Bourdieu's work leads to new questions that are beyond the scope of this chapter to answer thoroughly, but which indicate promising directions for future research.

Critical Theory

The concept of citizenship has several meanings within the social sciences; therefore, it is important to more closely examine the assumptions built into the concept of the “citizen consumer,” which I have referred to frequently in this chapter. As Shafir explains, citizenship is usually understood within the liberal-democratic tradition as a legal status that confers particular rights and responsibilities on individuals (Shafir, 1998). However, ancient Greek notions of citizenship, which have guided the arguments of modern Communitarian writers, define the term differently. For Communitarians (and their intellectual ancestors, the Greeks), citizenship is a practice, not a status. Weintraub explains that citizenship “is a process of active participation in collective decision making, carried out within a framework of fundamental solidarity and equality” (Weintraub, 1997, p. 10). It is this notion of collective deliberation and action that is at the heart of the concept of the “citizen consumer.” A consumer is a citizen not only because she has the right to choose freely amongst products in an open market, but also because she engages with other consumers to collectively discuss and determine rules and norms that apply to all market participants and to criticize the activities of the state and private corporations when they violate these rules and norms.

Critical theorists argue that market relationships in modern capitalism jeopardize this sort of reflexive, communicative citizenship. This argument appears in the work of Habermas and guides his historical analysis of the development and

decline of the “public sphere” in modern capitalist societies. Habermas argues that the public sphere emerged as the result of the long-distance exchange of commodities and news in the early capitalist societies of northern Europe. The subsequent mercantilist policies constituted the state as an impersonal authority that was distinct from the person of the feudal lord, but also transformed the economic activities of private persons into a topic of “general interest” and created national commodities markets that affected the fortunes of individual citizens (Habermas, 2000, p. 19). These linked changes created what Habermas calls the “public sphere of civil society,” which he defines as a communicative forum where educated professionals and capitalists debated the state policies that structured market relationships (Habermas, 2000, p. 23). For Habermas, this debate took place primarily in the press and was critical “in the sense that it provoked the critical judgement of a public making use of its reason” to interpret and evaluate the activities of the state (Habermas, 2000, p. 24).

This press-supported public sphere was a temporary phenomenon. According to Habermas, the institutions of modern capitalism transformed the press from a forum of rational debate between members of a public into a vehicle for the shaping of public opinion by privileged private interests. Two factors contributed to this outcome. In the political sphere, the establishment of constitutional states that provided legal protections for free speech reduced the antagonism between the press and political power and enabled the owners of newspapers to concentrate on the business of selling news in a competitive market. Second, the resulting commercially-oriented mass media became a forum for private interests through the growth of advertising.

Habermas explains that advertising in the press could have been limited to strictly economic topics, but in the context of class antagonism, the representation of private interests took on political significance. This was apparent in the form of public relations management by corporations, which used the “dramatic presentation of facts and calculated stereotypes” in the media to win public support for their activities (Habermas, 2000, p. 194). In Habermas’s view, “the resulting consensus does not seriously have much in common with the final unanimity wrought by a time-consuming process of mutual enlightenment, for the general interest on the basis of which alone a rational agreement between publicly competing opinions could freely be reached has disappeared precisely to the extent that the publicist self-presentations of privileged private interests have adopted it for themselves” (Habermas, 2000, p. 195).

Habermas’s approach has been criticized for being insufficiently critical of the origins and consequences of communicative reason (Foucault, 1987). However, it is helpful to see how recent work on consumer citizenship in the organic foods industry draws from Habermas’s notions of communicative reason and the public sphere. One example of such work is DuPuis’s analysis of “reflexive consumption” (DuPuis, 2000; Goodman & DuPuis, 2002). DuPuis defines a reflexive consumer as one who “listens to and evaluates claims made by groups organized around a particular food issue, such as GE (genetically engineered) foods, and evaluates his or her own activities based on what he or she feels is the legitimacy of these claims” (DuPuis, 2000, p. 289). For DuPuis, then, consumer activism is the result of reasoned evaluation, and the marketplace for organic foods in some ways approximates Habermas’s notion of the

public sphere. Of course, DuPuis recognizes that some claims-makers in the marketplace, such as corporations, pursue mainly private interests, such as increasing market share. However, she presents the marketplace as a relatively open arena of discourse and the consumer as an agent who participates in debates between different members of the market. DuPuis illustrates her argument with an analysis of marketing messages on organic milk cartons. She points out that different dairy companies offer claims that frame the consumer either as an authority, as a supporter of small-scale agriculture, or as an engaged member of the local community. “The consumer is evaluating claims and acting on these claims every time they reach for a milk carton or bottle at the store” (DuPuis, 2000, p. 293).

DuPuis’s account of reflexive consumer politics runs into some difficulty in light of Habermas’s account of the decline of the public sphere and in light of the analysis of consumer involvement in the organic industry that I have presented in this chapter. Habermas argues that the commercialization of the public sphere transforms rational debate into an artificial consensus created by public relations activities. As I have shown in this chapter, professionals in the organic industry rely on certain techniques and concepts of public relations, such as those presented in marketing literature, to understand consumer motivations and to develop ways of interacting with consumers. To the extent that these public relations techniques are effective in shaping consensus among consumers, the sort of rational and reflexive evaluation that DuPuis describes is likely to be undermined. My data also show that some professionals in the organic industry feel constrained in the sorts of claims that they can make to

consumers. For example, professionals in co-ops frequently feel that they cannot speak to consumers about the connections between food consumption and other social problems, such as poverty. These constraints exist not only because of their conceptions of consumers' desires and motivations to buy organic food, but also because of the presence of economically powerful competitors in the organic industry. In this sense, the commercial nature of the organic foods industry limits its ability to serve as a forum for engaged, communicative citizenship.

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital offers an alternative way to think about the politics of consumer citizenship and organic foods. For Bourdieu, the consumption of particular products cannot serve as a foundation for broad-based social criticism and public engagement. This is because patterns of consumption distinguish social classes from one another and tend to reproduce class antagonism and inequality. Cultural capital refers to embodied schemas of perception and interpretation that influence how an individual relates to objects with symbolic value that are available for consumption.¹¹⁶ Generally, one's cultural capital is a product of experience, upbringing and conditions of existence. By using the economic term capital, Bourdieu suggests that these schemas are convertible into material advantage, although the

¹¹⁶ Bourdieu explains that cultural capital also exists in objectified form (as in the case of an artwork) and is institutionalized as universally recognized credentials, such as university degrees (Bourdieu, 1986). In its embodied form, cultural capital is closely related, but not identical, to the embodied "systems of disposition" that Bourdieu calls the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 72-73; 1984, p. 6).

exchange rates vary in different social circumstances and institutional settings. A classic example is a university exam, which (especially in France) favors students who are able to interpret objects on an abstract and formal level and who possess a facility with words that is valued within economic institutions. In modern economies, success in academic environments is an important gatekeeping mechanism that sorts individuals into more or less lucrative careers (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1978).

Schemas of perception and modes of consumption also distinguish social classes outside of formal institutions by creating different lifestyle patterns, such as those related to food consumption. In late 20th century France, for example, Bourdieu detected a tendency for manual workers and small-scale employers to favor rich, heavy foods, whereas the more educated professionals and cultural workers, such as teachers, chose lighter, more delicate and more exotic foods (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 185). These class-structured differences in food choice also extended to habits of serving food (all at once in an informal setting or in a more structured, formal ritual) and of eating itself (with gusto and enthusiasm or more delicately and with self restraint). Finally, these differences in food choice and consumption reflected different orientations towards the body, different understandings of the effects of food on the body, and different ideas of gender which formed part of the “whole lifestyle” of different classes (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 185).

Crucial to Bourdieu’s model of class and consumption is that these different tastes, habits and lifestyles are not evaluated neutrally by members of society but stand in an antagonistic relationship to one another. In other words, members of each class

positively evaluate their own tastes and consumption habits while disparaging those that are different. For members of the working class, informality connotes friendliness and ritual connotes distance and pretension; while for educated professionals, informality and copious eating are bad manners and signify lack of self control. “On these moralities, these world views, there is no neutral viewpoint; what for some is shameless and slovenly, for others is straightforward, unpretentious; familiarity is for some the most absolute form of recognition, the abdication of all distance, a trusting openness, a relation of equal to equal; for others, who shun familiarity, it is an unseemly liberty” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 199).

Bourdieu’s bold model of class relations, cultural distinction, and the social construction of taste has earned its share of criticism.¹¹⁷ However, it has also influenced critical studies of the organic foods industry. Guthman’s examination of the market growth of organic salad mix, which “gave a jump-start to the California organic sector,” points out that this commodity’s “emergence was contingent on bridging the counter-cultural associations of organic food with a new class of eaters” (Guthman, 2003, pp. 47-48). In particular, Alice Waters, founder of the upscale Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse, linked expensive organic salads grown on local farms to the sensibilities of a growing population of young, upwardly mobile, politically progressive professionals. Organic salad mix, with its few calories, connotations of health and vitality and freshness, beautiful appearance, and implicit critique of industrial agriculture contrasted with fast food, which was seen as the

¹¹⁷ Much criticism has focused on the fuzziness of Bourdieu’s key concepts, such as “class,” “capital,” and “habitus” (Brubaker, 1985; DiMaggio, 1979; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

marker of an unreflexive, gluttonous, low-class sensibility. This association of salad mix and class taste in the Bay Area of the 1970s and 1980s created two ironies. First, it limited the market size of organic salad mix to a particular group of people. Second, attention to the consumption of organic salad obscured its conditions of production, which increasingly relied on the same intensive production techniques, production contracts and migrant labor networks that supported the conventional produce industry (Buck et al., 1997; Guthman, 2003). In Guthman's view, these two factors undermine representations of organic foods consumption as a broad-based challenge to industrial agriculture.

How does my data on professionals' views and relationships to consumers stack up against a Bourdieusian model of organic foods consumption? On one hand, some professionals clearly define organic foods consumption as a mark of distinction among consumers. This is more common amongst professionals who work in alternative organizations, such as co-ops, than it is among professionals who work in larger, national organizations. For example, one co-op membership coordinator explained that many of the shoppers at her store understood the connections between food production and broader social problems.

I think more and more they are starting to see it. Not, you know, not the people that shop and buy their food at Wal-Mart. They don't get it yet. But we know that our demographic that shop the co-op are highly educated, concerned, health conscious, environmentally aware shoppers and for them and for that growing population that might come to us rather than go to Wild Oats or Whole Foods because they want that local bread and they want that locally produced meat and they want to know that their vegetables didn't travel to the Whole Foods warehouse in Seattle or the Whole Foods warehouse in Austin

and then come to New Mexico. So people are starting to make those connections.¹¹⁸

This co-op professional clearly distinguishes the customers who shop at her store and “see” the broader implications of their food purchases from those who shop at Wal-Mart and “don’t get it yet.” She defines the co-op shoppers as an educated “demographic” that wants to understand the social relationships behind food production and seeks guarantees that their food purchases support local, sustainable agriculture. By implication, the customers that shop at Wal-Mart are unreflexive dupes of the mainstream food industry. For this professional, organic foods consumption, particularly the consumption of locally-grown organic foods available at the co-op, is a mark of merit and distinction.

But this professional’s explicit valuation of the orientations of customers who buy organic foods was not common in my sample. As I have explained in this chapter, most professionals attribute consumers’ decisions to buy organic food to individualistic motivations, especially health concerns and convenience. In the view of these professionals, such concerns are universal and cut across class boundaries. Individualistic motivations broaden the market for organic foods to include people from a variety of backgrounds. The marketing manager that I have quoted several times in this chapter explained:

From a demographic standpoint, we have a spread. We definitely have upscale consumers. They have more disposable income to spend more and food is such a relatively small portion of their take-home income that spending another thirty cents to get what they perceive as the good stuff causes, they are almost indifferent to it. Now our co-op shoppers,

¹¹⁸ Interview, March 12, 2007.

and we have a really nice base of core natural consumers that shop at small, independent health food and co-op food stores, we see incomes all over the place, and quite low incomes. It is the college kids, it is the brand new moms. People living very simple lives. And for these folks, they are spending a tremendous amount of their disposable income on food because it is a close-in value for them. And so, the mom who is barely making ends meet, but she will absolutely buy the organic milk for her children even if it means sacrificing something else.¹¹⁹

This professional specifically discounts the notion that such class-associated factors as income, occupation and lifestyle limit the size of the organic market, although she does imply that education (what Bourdieu would call cultural capital) is correlated with organic purchases. The growth of the organic industry also means that more organic foods are available in conventional grocery stores, rather than only in retail outlets with an upscale (such as Whole Foods) or countercultural (such as co-ops) reputation. The facts that few professionals link organic foods consumption with a distinctive, progressive sensibility, that they emphasize that the demand for organic foods cuts across income and lifestyle boundaries, and that organic foods can increasingly be purchased in stores with a middlebrow or even lowbrow reputation complicates an analysis that views organic consumption solely as a class-based strategy of distinction.

However, complicating the analysis is not the same as discounting it entirely. Although few professionals state that most customers buy organic foods in order to oppose the mainstream food industry (and to distinguish themselves from people who consume its products), the motivation of health, which professionals frequently mention, may itself be linked to class-based sensibilities. A final quote from the

¹¹⁹ Interview, April 10, 2007.

loquacious marketing manager illustrates this idea. For people who buy organic foods, she explains:

Health is absolutely the number one reason and we have lots of great research that shows that. It is this feeling that consumers are feeling newly empowered to change their health through the foods that they eat. There was a long period of time in this country where we just did not see that food and health connection. We kind of take it for granted now but we're more involved consumers now, even in a faster paced, busier setting, people are wanting to reconnect with where food comes from and how it can affect their health.¹²⁰

The critical, engaged attitude towards one's own health and the health of one's children that this professional believes is characteristic of Americans in general may in fact indicate a more distinctive class-based sensibility. In a study of middle- and working-class families' attitudes towards child development, Lareau identified two class-based "repertoires" of understanding (Lareau, 2003). Middle-class parents sought to cultivate children's skills through conversation, active participation in schoolwork, and planned extracurricular activities. This attitude is generally encouraged by teachers and other educational professionals, who are themselves members of the middle class. By contrast, the working class families in her sample did not relate to children as adults-in-training, but rather emphasized the boundaries between adults and children by expecting obedience from children and by allowing unstructured free time for the "accomplishment of natural growth" (Lareau, 2003, p. 3). These different parenting strategies led middle class children to develop skills that afforded them an advantage in formal educational institutions, including "greater verbal agility, larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority figures, and more

¹²⁰ Interview, April 10, 2007.

familiarity with abstract concepts” (Lareau, 2003, p. 5). Lareau argued that the correspondence of middle-class parenting strategies with educational professionals’ models of child development helped lock working class families out of success in school.

So what do ideas about child development have to do with the consumption of organic foods? According to the professional that I quoted above, consumers of organic foods feel “empowered” to take control of their health through food choices and are less hesitant to become “involved” in matters of food quality that were formerly restricted to doctors, food professionals and scientists. This willingness to challenge authority that is based on expertise is an important part of the middle-class strategies of cultivation that Lareau describes, but is much more rare in the working class families in her sample. The selection and evaluation of food products on the basis of claims of healthiness and purity and the discussion of those claims in the store, in the kitchen and at the dinner table may easily form part of a much broader strategy of middle-class family organization. In this sense, organic foods may be related to inequalities between social groups not only through displays of consumption and through particular sensibilities, but also because the act of consumption (which includes selection, evaluation, preparation and discussion as well as eating) may help reproduce cultural capacities that give middle-class groups an advantage in the race for educational credentials and jobs.

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION

As my work on this dissertation neared its end, American newspapers' normally sporadic coverage of food issues erupted on news of worldwide food shortages and price increases. The press suggested that the proximate causes of the crisis were a "perfect storm" of droughts in major food-producing countries, increasing demand for meat products from the middle classes of developing Asian economies, and the diversion of substantial amounts of US agricultural production to the booming biofuels market (Bradsher, 2008; Martin, 2008). Predictably, concerns quickly arose about the impact of rising prices on the production and consumption of organic foods. Several industry members fretted publicly that the rising costs would "price organics out of the market" and cause the industry to contract after nearly two decades of uninterrupted growth (Martin & Severson, 2008). On the other hand, Michael Pollan, the bestselling author and critic of rationalized expansion in the organic industry, argued that "higher food prices level the playing field for sustainable food that doesn't rely on fossil fuels," thereby helping to educate consumers about the "true" cost of food production (Severson, 2008). Like much of the discourse in the organic foods industry, this exchange reveals different assumptions about consumers and different convictions about the way that the industry should be organized.

At the beginning of this dissertation, I explained that two different cultural models of organization, which I labeled rationalized and humanistic organization,

shape the practices and discourse of professionals in the organic foods industry. In this concluding chapter, I return to these two cultural models in order to summarize how they influence the industry on organizational, individual and interpersonal levels. I also consider the relevance of this research for the broader problem of relationships between social movements and non-movement organizations, which I discussed in the introduction. Finally, I raise ideas and questions for further research in the organic industry.

Summary of Findings

The notion that abstract cultural models influence the formal structure of organization and the action of people in organizational fields has become widespread in sociology, especially with the rise of neoinstitutional approaches to organizations research (Clemens, 1993; Clemens & Cook, 1999; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991; Dobbin, 1994; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The organic foods industry presents a complicated example of this phenomenon because two different and somewhat contradictory models exist (Friedland & Alford, 1991). The modern American economy in general, and the food and grocery industry in particular, promotes a model of rationalized organization. Drawing on the work of Weber and Ritzer, I explained that the model of rationalized organization is based on such principles as impersonality, efficiency and calculability. In contrast to this rationalized model of organization, the connection of the organic foods industry to the

countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s has created a place for models of organization that I call humanistic. These humanistic models emphasize that decentralization, local autonomy, democratic participation, and personal development should be the substantive goals of organizations in the organic industry.

The first part of this dissertation investigated the influence of the two different models of organization on the structure of organizations in the organic industry. First, Chapter 2 considered institutions and organizations that make up what might be called the “mainstream” of the organic industry: the USDA’s National Organic Program (NOP) and the supermarket chains.¹²¹ One might expect that this sector of the industry would have assimilated organic foods to rationalized models of business, but I found that this was not entirely the case. Instead, these organizations displayed what I called “uneven rationalization.” The National Organic Program’s regulatory framework for the organic industry created a foundation for rationalized organization by increasing the efficiency of transactions and the ability of organizations to calculate the outcomes of investments in the organic industry and by developing (mostly) predictable regulations and channeling the activity of many activist groups into established political institutions. At the same time, the NOP institutionalizes democratic representation on the National Organic Standards Board (which has veto power over materials that are used in organic production) and prohibits certain procedures (most recently, cloning) that might increase the ability of industry members to produce organic foods in a controlled and efficient way. Turning from regulation to commerce,

¹²¹ Pollan has simply labeled this sector “Big Organic” (Pollan, 2006b).

I found that mainstream grocery corporations also failed to completely incorporate organic foods to a rationalized model of organization because of uncertainties stemming from the organization of the organic industry, structural changes in the grocery industry, and activist campaigns that challenge businesses which carry organic foods.

Chapter 3 shifted the focus of my investigation to a second group of organizations, the natural and organic foods co-ops, which developed from the countercultural activism of the 1970s. Leaders of co-ops seek to create alternatives to mainstream businesses and view their organizations as a means to create democratic participation in the food industry. While the co-ops might be expected to resist the models of rationalized organization that have accompanied the growth of the organic foods industry, I found instead that the co-ops I examined frequently borrowed organizational practices and forms from their mainstream competitors. Co-ops have borrowed these forms in order to compete with the efficient grocery chains that increasingly carry natural and organic products.¹²² However, the cultural and organizational mechanisms of symbolic realignment, loose coupling and bricolage have enabled co-op leaders to maintain a collective identity of their stores as participatory (or in my terms, humanistic) organizations. My examination of the co-ops showed that the leaders of co-ops draw on humanistic principles to argue that the role of managers, the relationship between stores, and other elements of organization should not be based solely on considerations of efficiency.

¹²² DiMaggio and Powell refer to this sort of borrowing under duress as “coercive isomorphism” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

In the second part of the dissertation, I examined professionals' talk about the motives of participants in the organic industry and about goals of the industry as a whole. Chapter 4 showed that most professionals in the industry describe their work as more than just a job, although my interviews also indicate that this is changing as employees of large, conventional foods corporations transition into work in their firms' organic divisions. More specifically, organic industry professionals argue that their work in the organic industry benefits society as a whole by improving the environment and by increasing the availability of healthy food. These professionals mobilized different strands of environmental thought and used different assumptions about the nature of environmental improvement to define symbolic boundaries within the industry and between the organic and conventional industries. A number of professionals drew on a perspective that views environmental improvement as a matter of reforming existing technologies to make them more efficient. In their view, the organic industry succeeded by converting more and more acres of farmland to organic management and by reducing the quantity of synthetic chemicals and environmentally-damaging industrial processes. Other professionals were more inclined to suggest that environmental problems are rooted in the dysfunctions of modern culture, which alienate people from nature and from their responsibility to steward the environment. These professionals tended to evaluate the organic industry – and the organizations that make it up – primarily in terms of its commitment to environmentalism as an ethical project. These two frames of environmentalism, which I called efficient reform and crisis of culture, roughly map onto the rationalized and

humanistic models of the organization of the organic market. There is some evidence to suggest that professionals in large organizations oriented towards the national market employed the efficient reform frame more than professionals in small organizations, such as co-ops. However, industry members frequently drew from both frames to offer inclusive descriptions of the organic industry, just as, on the organizational level, the industry combines rationalized and humanistic models.

Chapter 5 examined the cognitive frames that professionals in the industry use to understand consumer behavior and their techniques for interacting with consumers. I suggested professionals might see consumers either as engaged participants in a project of environmental reform or as individuals driven by self-centered needs, rather than a commitment to broad goals. In spite of *professionals'* commitment to environmental goals, they generally explain that most consumers buy organic foods for reasons of personal and family health, convenience and lifestyle. Professionals therefore rarely engage with consumers as fellow political actors. Amongst mainstream professionals, I found reluctance to make details about debates that occur within the organic industry public and to invite consumers to participate in these debates. The co-op leaders were sometimes more open to discussing issues related to food politics with their customers. However, they limited discussion of non-food political issues and also made “politically incorrect” products available to consumers.

Theoretical Contributions

Part of what is intriguing about organics is the uncertainty that members of this field display about whether they are part of a movement aiming towards social change or part of a market-oriented industry. The nexus of social movements and non-movement organizations has also been a fertile ground for sociological research in recent years. This dissertation makes several theoretical contributions in this area. Recent work frequently incorporates the assumption that social movement and organizations are discrete, bounded and different entities that frequently interact in an antagonistic way (Clemens, 2005; Zald et al., 2005). I have shown that in actual settings, people often blur and cross these boundaries. My analysis of environmentalist discourse and boundary work within the organic industry showed that industry members distinguish their work and their motives from professionals in the conventional foods industry by talking about social-movement-style goals, such as environmental improvement, and see the organic industry as a challenge to established agricultural practices. Industry members also sometimes act like members of social movements, as when they challenged the first version of the national organic standards through a grassroots letter-writing campaign. However, industry members also emphasize boundaries between social movement and industry within the organic field itself, and in some cases, attempt to exclude radical consumers groups or mainstream stores from legitimate participation. In the organic industry, as in other encounters between movement activity and formal organization, the relationships between

movement and organization should be documented empirically, rather than presumed in advance (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Binder, 2002; Katzenstein, 1998).

My study of the organic industry also emphasized the importance of cultural politics to the social movements-organizations line of research and the need for studies of how people draw on different and contradictory sets of meanings in practice. Drawing on literature in the new institutionalist and inhabited institutions approaches to organizations research, I defined cultural politics as work by social agents in specific contexts to resolve, contest or mediate differences between broad orders of meaning (Binder, 2007; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Many of the debates in the organic industry result from contradictions between the cultural models of rationalized and humanistic organization. In each chapter, I showed that these models influence action and discourse throughout the organic industry. In particular, my research demonstrated that professionals combine these models in creative ways, as in the case of co-ops which have maintained a participatory, humanistic collective identity while becoming structurally more similar to mainstream grocery stores.

My study of the organic industry also contributes to a line of research that examines culture and organization in markets by highlighting the distinctiveness of debates about exchange in different product arenas. Scholars have argued that the exchange of goods carries multiple meanings in different contexts and that conflicts in markets often develop because of different interpretations of exchange (Carrier, 1991; Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Mauss, 1967; Spillman, 1999; Zelizer, 1988). Studies of

contentious market fields have pointed out that a key difference exists between rationalized approaches to exchange and views that embed exchange in broader values and social relations (Healy, 2006; Miller, 2006; Velthuis, 2005). This difference also appears in the organic industry. For example, some members of the industry criticize grocery chains and large food corporations for alienating organic foods consumers from the farmers and communities that produced their food. On the other hand, other industry members argue against any measures that would constrain the growth of the organic market. However, the organic industry has unique features that lead this debate to differ in subtle ways from debates studied in other fields of economic activity. For example, the regulation of organic foods at a federal level creates a well-defined target for activists, and many of these debates play out in the forum of the National Organic Standards Board. Members of this board experience competing interpretations in a profound way, although, as I have shown, the actions of the board and of the National Organic Program have reinforced rationalized notions of exchange in the organic industry. In addition, the characteristics of organic foods, such as their perishability and the uncertainties related to consumer demand, create obstacles to rationalized exchange. Because organic foods spoil quickly sell at a slower rate than conventional foods, merchants find it challenging to apply the same logic of retailing to organic foods that they do to conventional foods.

A more encompassing question is whether organic foods can serve as the foundation for a broad-based movement of producers and consumers to alter meanings of exchange and economic organization in American culture. This question is the

subject of a lively debate amongst sociologists of food and agriculture and is key to the idea that organic foods constitute a social movement (Buttel, 2000; DuPuis, 2000; Guthman, 2003). I have stopped short of pronouncing on this question, but my research has brought several relevant ideas to light. First, a number of the organic professionals that I interviewed explained that consumers' ideas and expectations about organic foods vary widely and that there is little of the consensus or shared ideology that the notion of a producer-consumer social movement suggests. These professionals also explained that most consumers did not want and should not have critical knowledge of the debates surrounding organic foods production. In this view, the relationship between industry members and consumers is not one of partnership that places the two in an equal relationship. Instead, it is one that is more like a division of labor that allocates responsibility for the rules governing organic production to industry insiders and limits the role of consumers to driving industry growth through consumption. This finding is similar to predictions of critical theorists such as Habermas that private economic interests tend to limit the scope of critical public discourse in modern capitalist societies (Habermas, 2000). Bourdieu's work identifies a second potential problem with the idea of organic foods as a broad producer-consumer movement. On one hand, scholars have argued that organic foods have historically been limited to niche markets of affluent consumers, who have used consumption of these foods to mark distinctive lifestyles. My data shows that organic foods are beginning to break out of this market niche as they become more available in mainstream supermarkets. However, even within a larger market that consumes

organic foods mainly for health reasons, the tendency to reflect on food choices in order to control one's own health and to challenge the authority of the mainstream food industry may represent a middle-class, educated sensibility.

Looking Ahead

The best writing is circular: the closing of every text should suggest a new beginning. My dissertation points to several questions that future empirical research could explore. First, how does the organization of organic foods production and distribution differ in different national contexts? This project has focused only on the organic foods industry in the United States. However, demand for organically-grown foods is increasing in most of the world's affluent countries, and farmland in many developing nations is now being managed according to organic regulations for this export market (Yussefi & Willer, 2003). Organic industries exist worldwide, but only a few studies have employed cross-national comparisons to examine organic regulations and practices (for one example, see Bunin, 2001). There are reasons to believe that different approaches to organic foods exist in different countries. Policy research has shown that many European governments are stimulating the growth of the organic sector through direct payments to farmers who are transitioning to organic production (Dimitri & Oberholtzer, 2005). These governments view organic agriculture as part of the environmental portfolio of governments and justify the payments by explaining that organic agriculture contributes to more sustainable

agricultural practices. In the United States, organic is treated only as a marketing denomination by the USDA and the government does not offer assistance to transitioning farmers or funding for organic research and development. Arguably, this “market-led” (Dimitri & Oberholtzer, 2005) strategy of growth has contributed to the consolidation of organic farms and the rationalization of the organic industry. On another level, the definitions and regulations related to organic production differ in content and in institutional location in different countries. In the UK, for example, organic standards are largely under the control of the Soil Association, a nonprofit environmental organization, whose criteria for organic certification are more stringent than NOP standards in the area of animal welfare. Institutional differences such as this may affect the boundaries that industry members draw between the conventional and organic industries. Finally, scholars have charted differences in systems of food provisioning and in the cultural significance of food and agriculture in different national contexts (Fantasia, 1995; Ferguson, 1998, 2004; Friedberg, 2004; Marsden et al., 2000; Terrio, 2000; Watson, 1997). This may lead to relationships between organic foods and models of organization that contrast with the ones that I describe here.

A second avenue for research might explore the interactions of food consumers with the organic industry. Although market researchers have produced volumes of statistical and ethnographic research about consumer behavior, only a few academic sociologists have engaged with this subject (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont & Molnár, 2001; Schor, 2004; Zukin, 2004). Nevertheless, sociologists may have a great deal to contribute. In a recent article, Zukin and Maguire argue that sociologists, unlike

market researchers, are attuned to the potential contradictions of consumers' decisions, such as divergence between meanings of consumption promoted by retailers and those generated by consumers and conflicts that may exist between individuals inside a consuming unit, such as the family (Zukin & Maguire, 2004, p. 193). In this dissertation, I pointed out that professionals in the organic industry often speak about limiting consumer involvement in debates within the organic industry and view consumers as motivated mainly by individualistic concerns. However, some organic foods consumers and groups such as the Organic Consumers' Association have sought to push back against that definition of consumer behavior and have challenged companies that produce and sell organic foods. In addition, as I hypothesized in Chapter 5, consumers from different class and educational backgrounds may bring different cultural schemas of evaluation to bear when they confront organic foods in the supermarket (J. Johnston & Baumann, 2007). Ethnographic and interview research with consumers may help answer these questions and increase sociologists' understanding of the dynamics of food choice more generally.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

This appendix provides additional information about the methods that I used to collect and analyze data during my research about the organic foods industry. There are three parts. First, I provide a detailed narrative description of data collection and analysis, including a discussion of the particular challenges I faced as a researcher in this social setting. Second, I include the interview guide that provided the foundation for most of my interviews with members of the organic foods industry. Third, I offer a table that describes the characteristics of my interview sample.

Narrative Description

Interview Data

My interview sample for this project included retail store managers, managers and executives in firms that produce and distribute organic products, business consultants, farmers, activists, university researchers, government regulators, and marketing consultants. I developed the sample with two goals in mind. First, I sought to understand how members of the industry responded to the countercultural and environmentalist expectations of the industry's social movement background and to the imperatives of a growing, competitive market. Therefore, I made sure that my sample included people who, by virtue of their structural position within the industry,

would be likely to experience these competing pressures (for a discussion of this strategy, see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The bulk of my interview respondents fell into this theoretically interesting category, which included managers of natural foods cooperative stores and managers and executives of businesses that specialized in organic products. Second, I aimed to create as comprehensive and detailed picture as I could of the industry. This goal led me to conduct interviews with individuals who did not obviously fall into the category of interest but who could offer important background information about the industry's development and operations, such as consultants, researchers, and activists. I also achieved significant geographical variation in my interviews in order to meet my objective of understanding the industry on a national level. The Methodological Appendix, which is included at the end of this dissertation, presents the details of my interview sample.¹²³

I conducted face-to-face interviews with respondents in their offices, on their farms, or in local coffee shops. When geographical distance or schedule conflicts made face-to-face interviews impossible, I conducted interviews on the telephone. My interviews ranged from one half hour to over two hours in length, with most of the interviews lasting from an hour to an hour and a half. Except in rare cases where respondents refused my request to record the interview, I made digital recordings of all of these conversations and transformed the recordings into verbatim transcriptions. I also took detailed notes during all of the interviews. In many cases, I also sent

¹²³ It is important to realize that my sample is in no way a random sample of the population and that I do not seek to generalize my findings from this sample in order to make claims about the entire population of organic foods professionals. Instead, I use my interviews to create a detailed account of how (some) people and organizations within the industry respond to competing cultural models of organization. It is likely that these processes are widespread, but I have no direct evidence to this effect.

respondents copies of my interview guide in advance to reassure them that my questions would not cover confidential material and to help them prepare for the interview.

My interview guide covered ten topics and included approximately 40 questions. The actual number and type of questions that I asked in each interview varied with the characteristics of the respondent and with the time that the respondent was willing to grant to the interview. For example, I asked many questions about customers and merchandise to professionals involved in the retail side of the industry, but these questions were less relevant for regulators. I began questions about the respondent's work history and organization. Here, I encouraged respondents to speak about the meaning of their work in their own words and to compare their jobs and organizations to those of their counterparts in the conventional (non-organic) foods industry. Next, I asked a set of more detailed questions about merchandise, customers, connections to the local community, and relationships with business and social movement organizations. Answers to these questions helped me understand the relationship of the respondent and her organization to other organizations in the organic industry as well as providing access to the language that respondents used to talk about these aspects of their businesses. I concluded the interview by asking the respondent to reflect on changes in the organic industry in the 1990s and 2000s and in particular on the growth of natural foods retail chains, on the implementation of the National Organic Program, and on the increasing participation of mainstream food businesses in the organic industry. I made these questions as open-ended as I could so

as not to suggest a particular response to the respondent. I recognized that these questions referenced sensitive and controversial topics and I sought to understand how respondents talked about these issues in their own terms.

I analyzed the interview transcriptions with the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. My analysis involved careful reading of the interview transcripts in order to identify patterns of talk about organizational goals, industry changes and relationships with consumers. I used codes to organize these topics and compared statements within codes to understand variation in the discourse of professionals within the industry. I also coded the interviews to analyze specific challenges that professionals faced and to understand how they presented their personal objectives and the meaning of their work in the organic industry. Many of my codes arose inductively from my reading of the interviews, but I also coded passages that appeared particularly relevant to concerns in the scholarly literature. As in much grounded qualitative research, my coding was an iterative process that I created through my interactions with the data (Charmaz, 2001). Therefore, I did not use all of the codes that I created in my final analysis and I spent a significant amount of time reviewing and revising codes.

In my presentation of the interview data, I describe the speaker's job and organization, but I do not include the speaker's name. I have also made every effort to describe organizations in such a way that they will not be specifically identifiable. These practices follow the research protocol approved by the UCSD Institutional

Review Board and also the verbal commitments that I made to several of my interview respondents.

Textual analysis

To place the interview data in a broader context, I examined written coverage of the organic foods industry in numerous media sources. I used the Lexis-Nexis internet database and other websites to collect and read through major articles about the industry's development and about organic-related controversies in mainstream press. Sources for these articles included *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* magazine, *The Wall Street Journal*, *BusinessWeek* magazine, *The Nation*, and other publications. Although these articles do not constitute data that I analyze in this dissertation, they contributed to my understanding of the industry's history and helped me develop interview questions to ask respondents. I also examined articles about organics in trade press sources, such as *Advertising Age*, *Progressive Grocer*, and *The Natural Foods Merchandiser*. These articles frequently focused on the pragmatic aspects of the organic business, such as sales techniques and corporate acquisitions. Daily emails from food industry email lists, particularly Morningnewsbeat.com, helped me locate articles and stay current with industry developments. Similarly, periodic emailed news alerts from the activist group Organic Consumers Association were a source of information about developing controversies over corporate practices and the organic standards. Finally, I examined government publications related to the organic and

grocery industries, including the websites and archives of the National Organic Standards Board and the National Organic Program, debates about the Organic Foods Production Act that appeared in *Congressional Record*, and records of two Congressional hearings about competitive practices in the grocery industry.

In addition to this background reading, I performed more systematic grounded content analysis on two additional sources of textual data. First, I examined recent several marketing publications, especially books written by marketing consultant Harvey Hartman that draw on survey and ethnographic data to discuss consumers' relationship with organic foods, in order to understand the industry's relationship to the public (Hartman, 2001; Hartman & Wright, 1999). Analysis of these texts forms part of Chapter 5 of this dissertation. Second, I analyzed articles and editorials from the trade publication *Cooperative Grocer* that discussed competition, organizational change, and identity within the natural foods co-op sector. Data from these texts appears in Chapter 3. I discuss each source in more detail in each of these two chapters. My analysis of these texts was grounded in the sense that it involved close reading and identification and coding of recurrent themes that emerged from the texts (Charmaz, 2001). Although I did not enter the texts into a qualitative data analysis program, I treated them in much the same way as I did the interview transcripts. In a sense, these articles, editorials and books expanded my sample of interviews by giving

me access to discourse produced by industry members who were unavailable for direct communication.¹²⁴

Participant observation

In addition to my interviews and analysis of texts, I also conducted participant observation at events organized by an organic foods co-operative store in San Diego, CA and at four national industry meetings held in San Diego and Anaheim, CA. At the co-op, my participant observation included attendance at monthly board of directors' meetings over a twelve-month period. These meetings lasted for between one and a half to two hours and involved discussions between the elected store directors and store management about a variety of business, financial and community outreach issues. As a member of the co-op, I did not need special permission to attend these meetings, which were held in the store's conference room and usually involved between twelve and sixteen people. However, I did provide a brief presentation about my project to the board at the beginning of my observations and a more detailed discussion of my preliminary findings at the end of 2007. During the meetings, I sat around the conference table with the rest of the participants and took jotted notes on the topics of discussion and patterns of interaction. I participated only when directly

¹²⁴ Many recent analyses of texts in sociology have taken a more quantitative approach: they have counted the frequencies of specific themes, ideas or "frames" in samples of texts in order to construct cultural comparisons between different societies or historical periods (see Benson & Saguy, 2005; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Haydu & Lee, 2004; Saguy, 2003). I chose not to employ this approach because I felt that it was necessary to first identify themes inductively from the data before imposing a coding scheme from above on my sources. However, a quantitative, comparative approach conducted at a later date may help to expand the findings of this dissertation.

asked to do so, because the discussions ordinarily concerned store business and followed a set agenda. Before and after the meetings, I usually had a few minutes to interact informally with the store's directors and management and to ask follow-up questions. I also attended two annual membership meetings of the co-op, where the store's management and directors presented an annual report to consumer members, encouraged members to vote in store elections, and explained important outreach programs.¹²⁵

I attended the Natural Products Expo West in Anaheim, CA in March of 2005, 2006 and 2007 and the Produce Marketing Association Annual Meeting in San Diego, CA in October 2006. These several-day events combined seminars and talks run by marketing consultants and industry leaders with displays of new products and services by companies. As national events, these meetings drew several thousand attendees and were held in the major convention center in each city. At the meetings, I attended seminars related to the organic foods industry and walked the floor in the display section. At several seminars, I introduced myself and my work to the speakers and arranged to conduct follow-up interviews at a later date. I also spoke informally with members of the industry on the floor and at lunch. I found it very easy to take notes during the seminars, but it was nearly impossible to concentrate on writing amid the noise and commotion of the display floor. However, I recorded my thoughts and experiences after leaving the meeting in the evening or on the following morning. I

¹²⁵ In the first meeting, a co-op member encouraged attendees to get involved in a project to rehabilitate a local slough. In the second meeting, the co-op's manager asked members for donations to help the co-op buy a local farm.

also benefited from free audio recordings of seminars that were made available to attendees of the Natural Products Expo meetings.

My participant observation at these events provided a wealth of data that I would not otherwise have had access to. Some of this data was purely factual, such as information about market share, consumer trends and regulatory developments. However, my observations also helped me gain a deeper understanding of the relationships and positions of members of the industry. For example, participants at the co-op meetings spoke candidly about the competitive challenges that their store faced from new chain stores, such as Trader Joe's and a soon-to-be-built Tesco Fresh and Easy Market. Observation also allowed me to learn about how these store leaders responded to humanistic and market-oriented organizational goals in practice. At one point, for example, the board spent portions of several meetings debating whether to stop carrying a popular newspaper that was supporting a state measure to restrict abortion services to minors. On one hand, some members felt that the measure violated the organization's stated goal of advancing equality, but on the other hand, board members knew that many customers appreciated being able to pick up a copy of the paper while shopping for food and they did not want to alienate these customers. My access to these discussions also raised the important issue of confidentiality, which I discuss below. Similar events occurred at the large industry meetings. For example, one panel that I attended after the Harvey lawsuit featured a debate between the leader of the market-oriented Organic Trade Association and some of its critics. This data

placed my interviews in a broader context and allowed me to compare statements from interviews to actual interactions and practices.

Research Challenges

In an essay about “Markets as Cultures,” Mitchel Abolafia discusses several of the challenges he encountered during an ethnographic study of Wall Street “market-makers” (Abolafia, 1998). As financial elites, his respondents worked behind several organizational barriers that shielded them from outside scrutiny and questions. In fact, he was only able to gain access to the field – in this case, the trading floor of futures and stock exchanges – by leveraging personal relationships with business school students and alumni. Moreover, his respondents were short on time for interviews and possessed “a wealth of information that they deem[ed] proprietary” (p. 80). In order to establish rapport, Abolafia had to frame his objectives in terms that they considered legitimate and convince them that he had the ability (and desire) to accurately depict their lives. Each of these activities had to be handled with care because the authority that his subjects held in their organizations meant that he could be told to leave at any time. Finally, Abolafia found that market-makers were accustomed to controlling their interactions with others through a combination of verbal sophistication and occupational prestige and that he was forced to suspend his “critical stance” in order to get along in his interactions with them. Unfortunately, this created “the temptation to go native, i.e. to buy into their interpretation of the world or simply to join that world”

(p. 83). At each stage of the research process, then, Abolafia found ethnographic research in market settings to be a “daunting challenge” (p. 83).

Arguably, none of the challenges that Abolafia faced are unique to market settings (Lofland, 2006). However, I found his essay to be a useful tool for thinking through my experiences as a qualitative researcher in the organic foods business. Like Abolafia, I found that gaining and maintaining access to my respondents was a labor-intensive endeavor complicated by organizational barriers and geographic distance. I used a number of strategies to deal with problems of access. While none of the strategies achieved complete success, the combination proved more successful than any single strategy alone. I also had to tread carefully when presenting my project to respondents and when asking questions in interviews because of their sensitivity about confidential information and because of their awareness that not every researcher has what they feel are the best interests of the organic industry at heart. Finally, like Abolafia and many other qualitative researchers before and since, I found it difficult to maintain a critical distance from my respondents’ compelling stories. The greatest challenge, perhaps, was to collect and analyze the data neither as a cynic nor a cheerleader of the organic industry, but as a skeptical but respectful scholar and citizen.

As a newly-minted ABD, I began my research in 2005 at what seemed to me to be the most logical location: the grocery store. However, I quickly found this field site to be limited in its ability to provide data relevant for the questions I was asking. As what Lofland and Lofland (2006) called “semi-public settings,” grocery stores allow

outsiders to access certain areas and participate in certain activities (such as browsing the aisles and purchasing food), but keep others restricted (such as administrative offices and management meetings). I also learned that grocery stores, which represent a very large part of the average citizen's contact with the food industry, are in fact only one node in an extensive network of producers, distributors, processors and marketers. Just as the sales floor is the "front stage" to the grocery store management's "backstage," so are grocery stores themselves the "front stage" of a much larger food industry (Goffman, 1959). In both cases, I needed to get behind the scenes to collect data.

My first attempts to get backstage involved cold calls or emails to managers and, in some cases, simply walking into the store and asking to speak with the manager. I found this strategy was most successful with natural foods co-op stores. In one memorable case, a walk into a natural foods co-op in an unfamiliar city resulted in a ninety minute interview with the general manager, a veteran of the co-op movement from the early 1970s. Although the outcomes were not always so exciting, the overall willingness of these professionals to set aside time to answer my questions in detail was a testament to their commitment to open and humanistic forms of organization. I encountered slightly more skepticism amongst the few owners of non-cooperative natural foods stores that I interviewed, who sometimes asked for more detailed accounts of my work or showed less interest in my project. However, the cold call strategy proved most unsuccessful in accessing leaders of large organizations. Sometimes, my request was met with a clear and unequivocal refusal, as when a

representative of a large retailer explained that it was against store policy to participate in student research. In other cases, I simply found it impossible to determine who in an organization's complex hierarchy I should contact (when contact people were posted publicly) or found that my phone calls and emails went unreturned.

I used strategies of snowball sampling and personal connections to gain access to these harder-to-reach respondents. In one case, an advisor's chance acquaintance led to an interview with a trade association representative; in another case, I happened to meet a distant relative who had worked as a consultant to the grocery industry and was able to put me in touch with several academics and professionals who contributed to the project. I also concluded each interview by asking respondents to suggest additional contacts. However, I often found these suggestions to be unhelpful. In some cases, respondents suggested people who were less well connected to the organic industry than they themselves were. In other cases, respondents offered to pass my name on to their colleagues or to contact me later with the names and phone numbers of other people. In neither case did I acquire information that led to further interviews. Most often, I never heard from these individuals again. I do not attribute this to personal reasons, but rather to the busyness of my respondents and to the importance of confidentiality within the industry.¹²⁶ Overall, only a few interviews in my data set were the outcome of snowball sampling.

¹²⁶ One respondent told me explicitly that if he gave me names and phone numbers from his Rolodex, he would lose his job. Although I do not think that his situation was typical, I do think that professionals hesitated to become too closely associated with my project.

The final strategy that I used to obtain interviews was to approach panelists at the industry meetings that I attended. Overall, I found that this strategy had a high rate of success. In the first place, these individuals were accustomed to speaking in public, which made them more comfortable with the idea of a research interview. I also introduced myself by saying that I wanted to learn more about the subject of their presentation, which helped to create rapport. Second, these interviews also frequently resulted in rich and detailed data. By participating in industry panels, these individuals had already identified themselves as people who liked to talk about their work, and their openness and knowledge contributed to useful interviews.

Alongside organizational barriers to access, geographic distance also posed a unique challenge for this research. Because I had defined my research site, perhaps unwisely, as the entire United States organic foods industry, I found that many of the people that I needed to speak to (those highly placed in the industry) were located in other states. To make comparisons across natural foods retail stores, as I do in Chapter 3, I also needed to travel to other markets where these stores were located. My research thus involved travel to San Francisco, CA, Ann Arbor, MI, Washington, DC, Albuquerque, NM and New York City and combination of research work with visits to friends and attendance at conferences. When I was not able to travel for a face-to-face interview, I spoke with respondents on the phone. Phone interviews are sometimes frowned upon by qualitative researchers, but I found that conducting interviews by phone did not adversely affect the richness of the data that I collected. I attribute this to my respondents' familiarity with conducting business at a distance.

Finally, organizational barriers and geographical distance together contributed to sense of doubt that accompanied me throughout the research process about whether I had succeeded in becoming an “insider” in this social setting. This is an important question because ethnography depends on “immersion in others’ worlds” and on “participating as fully and humanly as possible in another way of life” as a means to collect rich and reliable knowledge (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 2; see also Geertz, 1973). In what sense was I participating in the geographically dispersed and organizationally shielded organic industry? Here, it is important to remember the qualifier that is attached to the imperative to participate. Most of the organizations that I engaged with had a formal staff with clearly defined duties. Without actually becoming an employee of these organizations, I would not have been able to achieve complete immersion.¹²⁷ Even the members of the relatively open organization where I conducted participant observation were not entirely at ease with me “hanging out” in their meetings. One staff member with whom I had repeated contact mentioned to me in a comment that I hope was not entirely serious that I “made her nervous” sitting in meetings with my note pad jotting comments on the proceedings. As I described above, I attempted to become more of an insider by presenting my research to the organization. I also attempted to participate more fully by offering to volunteer on several occasions, but I found that this organization preferred to rely on professional staff. I thus felt cautious about overstepping the boundaries of participation allowed by

¹²⁷ Many ethnographers have gained access by becoming employees (e.g. Grindstaff, 2002; Sallaz, 2002). However, this strategy may have restricted the breadth of my investigation while increasing the depth of data about a single organization. In addition, my responsibilities as a teaching assistant at the University of California, San Diego may have precluded accepting other employment, and none of the organizations that I examined was hiring.

the inhabitants of this social scene. On the other hand, I took every opportunity that presented itself, from reading the trade press to attending industry conferences, to immerse myself in the discourse and relationships of the industry.

As I conducted interviews and observations for this project, I quickly learned that one important category used by my informants was that of confidential or sensitive information. In practice, informants used this category to designate two things. First, they used it to describe information about products and business initiatives that they wished to conceal from competitors in the market. For example, one industry member who initially refused an interview explained to me that his firm was on the cutting edge of the industry and that it would not be appropriate for him to talk about business practices with an outside researcher. After I redefined the topic of the interview to focus on the development of the organic industry and sent him a list of questions in advance, he consented to the interview but refused to be recorded. While this was an extreme response among my respondents, the notion of confidential information surfaced in many contexts. It was somewhat awkward when, during my participant observation, members of the natural foods co-op discussed business issues that they later explained they would prefer not to be made public. In this case, I did not want to jeopardize my access or the organization itself by revealing those topics in my analysis. However, I felt that, because the meeting itself was public and open to all members of the co-op, my informants could not retroactively declare some information off limits. Fortunately, I found that most of this information was irrelevant to my final analysis and I was able to respect my informants' wishes.

The second way that informants used the category of confidential or sensitive information was to refer to concerns about press coverage of the organic industry. Many members of the industry share a conviction that negative press coverage could severely damage sales of organic foods and point out that certain newspaper and magazine articles have already contributed to confusion among consumers about what organic means. Thus, one informant asked me flatly before beginning an interview, “I’m not going to see this appear in *BusinessWeek*, am I?” Informants were also concerned that I might attribute quotations to them that appeared to criticize other firms in the organic industry. In order to differentiate my research objectives from journalism, I promised my respondents anonymity. I also explained that my research was more extensive and complex than the work that might go into a magazine article. My university affiliation, which I made clear to all respondents, may also have reassured them about the nature of my work.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that I faced was to establish and maintain a “critical stance” towards the data I collected (Abolafia, 1998). As a consumer, I favor organic and minimally processed foods and as a citizen, I strongly support the goals of food industry reform that energize many of the organic industry’s members. Nevertheless, I am aware that the organic industry, as it is currently organized, raises a number of problematic issues. For example:

- the higher price, limited availability and cultural sophistication of organic foods may reproduce existing patterns of inequality and conflict among consumers

- the rules governing organic foods production and processing make no mention of labor conditions or farm size
- consumption of organic foods may serve as an individualistic and non-confrontational outlet for concerns that might have led to more active political participation
- the percentage of food produced organically in the United States is miniscule compared to the amount of non-organic food

In addition, significant disagreements exist within the industry about what the organization and reformist mission of organic food and agriculture should consist of. Thus, my engagement as a researcher with the industry challenged me to critically evaluate my own biases and assumptions as well as to attend to my respondents with a critical ear. The eloquence of many of my respondents, particularly those accustomed to dealing with the press, and the complexity of the organic industry itself frequently made this boundary work into an uncomfortable task (Emerson & Pollner, 2001). Who was I to question professionals who had built careers in this industry? Did I really understand what I was talking about? And wouldn't my critical questions undermine a young and fragile industry? While no respondent asked these things to me directly, I spent many anxious moments pondering them in front of my computer.

I never arrived at a satisfactory answer to these questions, but they were still questions worth asking. At least, they have given me a humble respect for the ethnographer's art that I may have lacked at the beginning of this work. More

pragmatically, I used several “distancing practices” to come to terms with my data (Emerson & Pollner, 2001, p. 248). First, I found it necessary to withdraw from the field before beginning serious analysis of the data. Doing this helped me separate my interview transcripts and other pieces of data from my personal relationships with informants and from my ongoing efforts to stay on top of new developments in the organic industry. Thus, although the industry itself is complex and constantly changing, my work is based on the assumption that the data that I collected point to relatively durable patterns of discourse and thought that underlie these changes. Second, I regularly discussed my arguments and analysis with members of my dissertation committee and with other scholars who had no particular stake in the organic industry. This helped me identify assumptions and biases in the writing and frame my analysis in terms that resonate with a scholarly audience. Presentation of various chapters at several academic conferences also provided additional feedback.

At several points during my research, members of the industry and others asked me whether I, myself, bought organic foods and by extension, whether I “believed in” the organic difference. I answered the questions as truthfully as I was able to by saying that I do purchase some organic foods but for reasons of cost and convenience, I do not eat an exclusively organic diet. Market research shows that in this, I resemble the majority of organic foods consumers, who mix organic with conventional foods in their diets. On a somewhat deeper level, I do “believe in” (that is, normatively support) several features of the organic project: I agree that, where possible, food should be grown without toxic chemical supports and moreover, that

consumers should have access to knowledge about how their food is grown and the ability to influence food production practices either through direct involvement in the political process or through supporting “green” products, such as organic in the marketplace.

Whether or not organics are “really” better, though, is not relevant for the questions that I ask in this dissertation. I am interested here in how industry members define what they are doing and simultaneously construct an arena of discourse and practice around the notion of “organic”. Clearly, most (but not all) industry members believe that organic foods are somehow superior to non-organic foods and work to communicate that belief to other people and to act on the basis of that belief. I am not interested in determining whether this belief is right or wrong or whether organic foods are virtuous or a hoax. What I do try to accomplish in this dissertation is to build an understanding of the permutations of this belief across the industry and to discuss how the belief fits with the other concerns and commitments that members of the industry have.

Generic interview guide

Emerging Markets for Organic Foods in the United States

List of Interview Topics and Questions for retailers

1. Work and commitment
 - 1.1. Could you tell me what you do in your job?**
 - 1.2. How did you begin your work in the natural/organic foods industry?**
 - 1.2.1. Why did you decide to begin working in the organic foods business?
 - 1.3. Did any particular books or experiences influence your decision to go into the organic and natural foods business? Which ones?**
 - 1.4. How does the work that you do in this store differ from what a person who holds a similar position in a conventional store might do, if at all?**
 - 1.5. Would you say that you think about the business of selling food differently than someone who works in a conventional store? If so, how so?**
 - 1.6. What keeps you committed to the work that you do?**
 - 1.6.1. For you, does being involved in organic or natural foods reflect any environmental commitments or beliefs, or any other ethical beliefs?
 - 1.6.2. How long have you worked in the position you are in now? How did you start working here?
 - 1.6.3. Before this position, did you work in the organic foods business?
 - 1.6.4. What do you like most about your job? Is there anything you dislike? What keeps you engaged in your work?
 - 1.7. Do you think of your work mainly as a form of social activism, or is it more of a business, or something else?**

2. The business/organization

2.1. How would you describe your store/business?

2.2. Could you tell me about the history of your business/organization?

2.2.1. Has your store always occupied the same location? If not, why did it move?

2.2.2. Has your store gone through any distinct periods in its life so far, such as periods of growth and then periods of stability? Could you describe these periods to me?

2.3. How many people work at this business/organization, and what are their responsibilities?

2.4. What sort of training do employees receive?

2.5. Do employees generally come to this organization with an interest in organic foods?

2.6. In your opinion, how does your business differ, if at all, from a mass-market supermarket? How about from a natural foods chain? Another independent store or co-op?

2.6.1. Do you think that these are significant differences? Why?

2.7. What does it take to run a successful natural and organic foods store?

3. Merchandise (retail businesses only)

3.1. How do you decide which products to carry in your store?

3.2. What sorts of products do you refuse to carry? Why?

3.2.1. Do you only carry organic products?

3.2.2. How would you describe the differences between organic foods and conventional foods. Is it a distinction of quality or is it more of a marketing distinction?

3.2.3. Does anyone in the store specialize in buying and handling organics in particular, or is it done by the same people who handle non-organics?

3.3. How do you determine how much shelf space to allocate to various products?

3.4. How, generally, do you determine the prices of products?

3.5. What are your sources of information about new products? Which is the best source of information?

3.6. Do you make efforts to include small scale, artisan, or local producers' products? Why is this important to you?

3.6.1. Whom do you purchase your products from, and why do you purchase from those sources?

3.6.2. Do you work with a national distributor? With local and regional distributors or wholesalers? Direct from producers?

4. Customers (retailers only)

4.1. What characterizes the customers who shop at this store?

4.2. What sort of promotion does this store do?

4.3. Do you offer any outreach programs or events, such as cooking or gardening classes? Which programs or events are most popular?

4.3.1. What products are most popular among your customers these days?

4.4. How would you describe the shopping experience that you seek to provide for customers here?

4.4.1. Is there a way for customers to give you feedback about the store?

4.4.2. Do customers ask for information about particular products in their shopping, such as information about vitamin use or about the ways in which food products were produced? For which sorts of products do they most frequently seek guidance?

5. Community

5.1. Is your store well suited for the community that it is in? Why or why not?

5.2. Do you see your store as part of a community of like-minded organizations (small farms, other independent organic stores)? How would you describe this community?

6. Associations

6.1. Do you belong to any trade or business associations? Which ones? Why?

6.2. Do you read trade literature, such as the *Natural Foods Merchandiser*? Which publications do you find most helpful?

6.3. Does your organization engage in any activity that you would describe as political? What is this activity? Why do you engage in it?

6.3.1. Do you sponsor letter-writing campaigns or call-in campaigns?

6.3.2. Did you participate in the public comment period for the first draft of the USDA organic standards? Why?

6.3.3. Does your store participate in any environmental organizations, like Greenpeace or the Sierra Club or something more local?

7. Chains

7.1. How would you describe the impact of specialty supermarket chains, such as Whole Foods or Wild Oats, on organic retailing?

7.1.1. For your store, have these chains had an impact? Please describe.

7.1.2. Is there anything that you might like to do in your store but you feel that you are not able to do because of competition from chain retailers?

7.2. What is the best way for co-ops and independent businesses to maintain their position in the industry?

7.3. Has the entry of large retailers and the acquisition of some organic producers by large food companies been a positive or a negative development, in your opinion? Why?

7.3.1. In your opinion, if large retailers and food corporations play the dominant role in the industry, what would that mean for organic foods and organic consumers?

8. The organic trade

8.1. Can you describe for me any other changes that have occurred in the organic marketplace since you have participated in it?

8.1.1. In general, do you think that these changes have had a positive or a negative effect?

8.1.2. What about for your organization? A positive or negative effect?

8.1.3. How so?

8.1.4. There have been a number of changing trends in the food industry, such as the growth of the organic industry, the increasing number of artisanal producers. Have these trends affected your store in any way?

8.2. In my research so far, I have found that there is some debate in the organic industry about whether the USDA's organic standards are being "watered down". Do you have an opinion about this issue?

8.2.1. Are you following the current debate about the use of synthetic compounds in organic products? The Harvey lawsuit? The debate about organic dairies?

8.2.2. In general terms, would you say that the organic industry does a good job in enabling people to purchase the sorts of foods that they want to eat?

8.3. What are the greatest challenges facing the organic industry in coming years?

8.4. What do you think that the industry will look like five or ten years from today?

9. General questions about organic

9.1. Is there anything that you would like to see change about the organic industry as it is currently?

9.2. What is the core or essence of organic, for you?

9.2.1. Do you think of organic primarily as a social movement, as a type of product, or in some other way?

10. Miscellaneous

10.1. Is there anything else about your job, your store, or the organic industry that you think I should know about?

10.2. Can you suggest anyone else in this organization or in the organic trade that I might want to speak with about these topics?

INTERVIEWS WITH ORGANIC INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

	DATE	POSITION	ORGANIZATION	LENGTH	TAPED?
1	4/22/2005	President	National consumer products company	60 min	Y
2	6/6/2005	Owner	Organic specialty products farm	60 min	Y
3	10/10/2005	General manager	Natural food co-op	60 min	Y
4	10/26/2005	Owner	Independent natural foods store	80 min	Y
5	1/10/2006	Development director	National co-op trade association	70 min	Y
6	3/10/2006	Director of consumer and retail trends	Marketing research firm	60 min	Y
7	3/30/2006	Board of directors member	Natural foods co-op	58 min	Y
8	4/18/2006	Asst. director of education and outreach	Natural foods co-op	60 min	Y
9	5/16/2006	General manager	Independent natural foods store	78 min	Y
10	5/26/2006	Grocery manager	Independent natural foods store	70 min	Y
11	5/29/2006	Board of directors president	Natural foods co-op	70 min	Y
12	5/31/2006	Owner/chef	Organic foods restaurant	60 min	Y
13	6/20/2006	Manager	Independent natural foods store	40 min	Y
14	6/20/2006	Manager	Independent natural foods store	30 min	N
15	6/21/2006	Former manager	Independent natural foods store	30 min	Y
16	6/21/2006	Co-owner	Natural foods co-op	45 min	Y
17	6/22/2006	Director	Organic research and advocacy group	80 min	Y
18	6/23/2006	Co-owner and founder	Independent natural foods store	65 min	Y
19	8/16/2006	General manager	Natural foods co-op	100 min	Y

20	8/26/2006	Store manager	Independent supermarket	20 min	Y
21	9/1/2006	President and co-founder	National consumer products company	58 min	Y
22	9/22/2006	Organics Marketing Manager	National grocery distributor	60 min	Y
23	11/20/2006	R&D Manager	National grocery distributor	60 min	N
24	12/5/2006	Vice president	National grocery distributor	39 min	Y
25	12/7/2006	Public Affairs Analyst	National organic industry trade group	70 min	Y
26	12/13/2006	Organics category manager	National grocery distributor	90 min	Y
27	2/20/2007	General manager	Natural food co-op	70 min	Y
28	3/12/2007	Membership coordinator	Natural foods co-op	60 min	Y
29	3/28/2007	Principal	Public relations firm	60 min	Y
30	4/5/2007	National grocery category manager	Natural foods supermarket chain	35 min	Y
31	4/10/2007	National sales and marketing manager and NOSB member	National consumer products company	90 min	Y
32	5/15/2007	President	Organic research and advocacy group	40 min	Y
33	9/11/2007	General Manager	Natural foods co-op	60 min	Y
34	11/12/2007	Member	National Organic Standards Board	90 min	Y
35	1/4/2008	Vitamin buyer	Natural foods co-op	45 min	N

ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWS*

	DATE	POSITION	ORGANIZATION	LENGTH	TAPED?
1	6/21/2005	Independent farmer	Community supported farm		Y
2	7/5/2005	CSA farmer	Community supported farm	2.5 hrs	N
3	5/2/2006	Director	Local food advocacy group	90 min	Y

4	9/11/2006	Marketing Professor	Research university	17 min	Y
5	11/18/2006	CSA farmer	Community supported farm	30 min	Y

* I did not include the farmers listed above with the organic industry professionals because they did not derive most of their income from their work producing organic foods (they had other sources of support).

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