Negotiating Identities in the Networks of the Irish Organic Food Movement

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Abstract

Sociologists see social movements as consisting of networks of individuals, groups and organisations that are linked in many different ways. Networks in social movements are believed to have various functions. For example, they facilitate the circulation of resources, such as information and world views. Networks are also vital in mobilisation, as individuals’ contacts and links play an important part in the decision to get involved. They are the place where shared beliefs and practices are shaped and negotiated, so that common meanings can be assigned to events. However, evidence from a study of the organic food movement problematises the relationship between networks and collective identity. Organic farming can potentially empower farmers who are otherwise dependent on scientific experts and agrifood corporations in the conventional system of industrialised food production. To do so, the movement must mobilise conventional farmers into its networks. As individuals, these agents are already embedded in other networks and relationships. They bring with them interests, ideologies and identities that do not necessarily fit in the organic ‘frame’. Like many other contemporary social movements, therefore, the organic movement is made up of fluid, flexible networks, where members take on multiple allegiances, belonging also to other groups and associations. Such overlapping memberships can help the circulation between movements - and between movements and the wider community – of tactics, skills and other resources. However, they can also lead to conflicts of interests or power struggles and they necessitate the constant (re)negotiation of individual and collective identities. This paper will examine these processes within the Irish organic food movement.

Introduction

In order to affect social change a social movement must extend its membership, mobilise its members and inspire the general public. To do so, the representations, understandings and frames constructed by the movement must be passed on through the networks made up of the organisational and personal contacts of individual members. The practices and skills involved in producing, selling and consuming organic food were developed according to ideological values and beliefs concerning environmental, social and economic sustainability. They can potentially empower a variety of people involved in various struggles. However, as new members join the movement, they bring with them a wider range of concerns, values and identities must be negotiated among consumers and producers of organic food. In the face of this diversity, the question arises whether it is possible to sustain networks that are enduring enough to facilitate the life of the movement. This paper will therefore seek to explore the processes of construction and negotiation of a collective identity within the networks of the Irish organic food movement.

Conflict, networks, identity: the Irish organic food movement

Networks are seen by many scholars as a useful concept when analysing social movements. Sociologists understand social movements as consisting of webs of individuals, groups and organisations that are linked in many different ways. Networks in social movements are believed to have various functions. For example, they are seen as the ‘submerged reality’ of a movement, the invisible day to day structure of it, which exists outside of protests, and in which alternatives are constructed and put into practice (Melucci, 1986). Networks facilitate
mobilisation, as individuals’ contacts and links play an important part in the decision to get involved (Kriesi, 1988). Finally, social movement networks facilitate the circulation of resources, such as information, world views and lifestyles (della Porta and Diani, 1999). One approach which in particular emphasises their role is that of Diani (1992; 2003) who sees networks ‘as the basis for a theory of social movements’ (2003: 306). He defines a social movement as ‘a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity’ (1992:13). According to his model, social movements consist of three different dynamics: Conflict, informal networks, and collective identity.

First of all, Diani highlights the importance of social conflict. As movements are either promoters or opponent of social change, they necessarily become involved in conflicts with specific social actors. Conflict can relate to the uneven distribution of material goods, but it can also be of a cultural nature, and concern self definition, lifestyle and meaning. Thus, social movement members identify specific actors as their opponents, and seek to damage them in some way. The organic food movement challenges not only material issues such as food production and distribution processes, but also cultural assumptions and meanings about food and our relationship with nature. It can be understood as a defence against the system taking over the private lifeworld issue of what goes into our bodies (Habermas, 1981). The movement seeks to reorganise food production and consumption, both regarding the way we treat the natural environment, and also the social relations through which food is bought and sold. It define its enemies as actors with opposing interests working within the food system. The actions of producing and consuming organic food is both a refusal and an active step towards damaging an enemy such as a chemical manufacturer or a supermarket chain. The damage can be financial, by withdrawing from the conventional exchange system, but more detrimental is the symbolic damage, such as changing public opinions on issues relating to the production and distribution of food.

Secondly, according to Diani, social movements are made up of informal networks, which extend beyond the boundaries of membership of any single organisation (2003). These ‘may range from the very loose and dispersed (…) to the tightly clustered’ (1992:7). There is therefore no formal membership of a social movement. Organic farming members may be seen to belong to networks of both the formal and the informal kind. In order to sell produce as organic a person must be registered with one of three Irish organic associations, IOFGA (the Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association), Organic Trust or Demeter. Membership fees are paid to national organisations in return for newsletters, access to information and events and for the right to vote in annual elections of the board. However, locally, organic farmers, growers and consumers come together in informal networks and at local events, which often cross the boundaries of organisational membership. We can therefore follow Tovey’s (1997: 52) definition of membership of the organic movement when she insists:

> the movement is wider than just the farmers, and membership within it involves many other things besides producing food or being certified to do so according to some strict set of production criteria. Reading “alternative” media, belonging to some networks and organisations like city-based food co-operatives, and turning up at occasional movement events, may all also be bases for “membership”.

Finally, Diani’s third point is that the members of a social movements express or feel a certain sense of belongingness, they engage in the construction and reproduction of a collective identity. This is a mutual recognition, a broader solidarity which extends beyond any specific event, activity or organisation. Collective identity allows common meaning to be assigned to events. But, Diani (1992) reminds us, it is not homogeneous. A range of different ideas and orientations may be present in the one movement, and negotiation is ongoing. In fact, collective identity as a concept has been the focus of much research and theoretical developments in recent years. Melucci (1996: 69) argues that we must not approach social
movements ‘as if collective actors existed themselves as unified ontological essences, readily offered for the comprehension of the researcher’. Therefore, as Conway (2004: 25) puts it, in social movement theory, the meaning of identity has changed ‘from being a thing (…) to being a process’. The processes of construction and negotiation of a collective identity within the networks of the organic movement is what this paper will seek to explore.

**Movements as networks of communication**

Diani (2003) highlights the complexity of social movement networks. For example, he explains, there are networks based on collective identity, where members hardly ever meet. At the opposite end there are also networks based on interaction and contact where a collective identity may not be shared. It would appear, therefore, that membership of any network cannot be taken for granted. Any research on social movement networks must remain open ended and relatively unstructured in order to allow the understandings and relationships of research subjects to emerge. Many sociologists studying social movement networks tend to aim for macro models of network structures, which give an overall understanding of how ‘nodes’ in a network are connected to each other. While this is a useful way of understanding structural differences between movements, it can tell us little about what actually happens during interactions between members. An exception to this trend is work by Mische (2003), who suggests that networks are not just locations for communicative practices, they are in fact composed of them. Networks, she claims, are generated by social practices. In other words, movement networks are sustained by activists’ talk, and Mische argues that in order to understand networks, this communication is what we should examine. The approach utilised for the current paper is based on qualitative methods which allow the researcher to explore what actually happens at particular inter-connections, accessing the experiences and points of view of members. Thus, the focus of the research has been the communication among the members of the organic food movement, not only in interviews, but also in the social settings that are the actual instances of their networks. This has meant participant observation in key social settings such as farmer’s markets, co-ops, and at events organised by the movement such as open days on farms or gardening workshops. Interviews with a range of members of these settings, both producers and consumers have been carried out to explore the experiences of these actors. Finally, written communication, such as organic magazines, posters and leaflets have been examined.

**Organic networks**

The organic movement in Ireland was started by people who wanted a self sufficient lifestyle and who sought to escape an urban existence (Moore, 2003). They bought small plots of land in rural areas, and organic producers are therefore often physically removed from one another. They work long hours in the fields, which further separates them. On the other hand, organic ideology values direct selling and close personal relations that allow trust and traceability of food. Organic producers have therefore set up networks for trading and exchanging goods between each other and with their customers. They are therefore less isolated than it would appear. The complexity of the networks of the Irish organic movements resemble those of other contemporary movements. The research has identified three main levels, first identified by Oliver and Myers (2003): These authors have found that actors in a movement can be connected in three different ways, spatially (where protests spread because people are physically near it); organisationally (which includes communication between organisations) and through what they call other social (meaning kin- and friendships, which can be the basis for recruitment and support for a movement). In the current research, interviewees from the organic movement reveal how they are connected. At the organisational level, this means being a member of one of the three organic associations, or at least subscribing to their newsletters. It may also mean being connected through other sources such as magazines,
books or for some the internet, in order to connect with the wider organic movement in Ireland and abroad. Spatially, at the level of the local movement, many are members of local organic groups, who organise fairly structured events, such as a series of farm walks among members, regular study groups where books on organic methods are discussed, or other educational events. At the social level, there are many links between organic producers, for instance when buying inputs (such as animal feed) or produce, or renting land off each other, or simply friendships, and there are interpersonal links too between producers and their consumers in the networks of direct selling at farmers markets or at the farm.

Multiple affiliations, complex identities

Apart from their involvement in the organic movement itself, producers and consumers of organic food are also affiliated with a range of other groups and movements. The networks to which they belong or are in contact with range from formal political parties (mainly the green party but also labour, and workers’ parties); food associations (such as Slow Food, the Irish Seed savers, the Irish Rare Breeds, Goat Producers’ and Cheesemakers Associations, Compassion in World Farming, GM Free Ireland, Vegan & Vegetarian Societies, and Fair Trade Organisations); environmental projects (for example Irish Womens Environmental Network, The Village (an ecological housing community), The Hollies (a centre for sustainability and permaculture), Sonairte (an ecology centre); Feasta (Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability); and anti-Thorp/Sellafield groups; to strictly personal connections such as their local communities and their families. Many individuals belong to several such groups, which gives a certain overlap between them. This is also observed by one organic producer, when he describes the members of the food co-op where he sells his vegetables:

Some relationships don’t relate to the food at all, you know, the actual relationship you would have with somebody, there would be people in there that I would know because they are involved in politics or music or, you know, so you might just be, ‘were you at any good gigs this week’, and he’d say, ‘no I wasn’t really but I want a bag of spinach as well, but do you know who I heard last week’, and ‘d you know’, that sort of stuff. There’d be those sort of conversations going on as well. (…) Certainly people I knew from the vegetarian society. There are people I know from when our kids were going to the multidenominational school, you know, you kind of get a lot of that lefty fringe in [there]. So if you were involved in any of those sort of things, you know, there’s people in there from various different backgrounds.

[Tommy, organic grower and market trader, Wicklow]

Multiple affiliations have been found to characterise other contemporary social movements. Diani has argued that the influence of a movement depends on its ability to builds links with other sectors and among movement members, and that the broader the range of ties the greater the impact a movement can have (Diani, 1997).

Such multiple affiliations reflect the ambiguous nature of organic identity which is under constant negotiation and has many different meanings. A varied range of people are appropriating the knowledge and skills of organic production, and making use of it according to their needs. People who identify themselves as organic consumers or producers also have other identities, hence their membership of such a broad range of networks. When asked, members give a wide variety of reasons for becoming involved. For some, it was a matter of taking back control over their own and their dependants’ bodies through what they eat or how they work. Others are members of different social movements and organic production or consumption is a method for living a life according to these other ideologies, be they environmental, or new religious ones. For others again, it is a way in which to survive
financially as a small farmer. The following examples reflect the diversity of motivations behind mobilisation:

* For some, it is a matter of lifestyle, such as the consumer who explains that he joined an organic consumer group because he wanted *Somewhere for people to talk about environmental, ecological things, things like that, spiritual things, I’m very interested in spiritual things, but not just that. The foods we eat and so on. That’s why I joined’*

* Others join out of commitments to environmental values, exemplified by a part time grower who explains that *I was a member of an environmental group, and I was worried about things like oil resources, carbon dioxide, and my interest in organic gardening has come from that.*

* Others again might see their main identity as that of a small farmer, and ‘going organic’ is a way of protecting their livelihoods: One such member comments, *If I wasn’t certified organic I just wouldn’t be able to do it. It’s a way to live a good life, which in his case means to continue the family farm.*

Organics is in a way a coming together of all these different people, worldviews and aims, bringing them together through local projects and organisational links.

### Organic identity negotiation

‘Organic identity’ as we have seen has many different meanings. In the face of such diversity, what helps sustain enduring networks is constant negotiation. We can identify at least three dimensions of identity negotiation over the meaning of organic: between the movement and its wider context, within the movement; and internally to the individual member.

#### Identity negotiation in a wider context

One example for negotiation over what it means to be organic is the struggle over meaning *between the movements and its opponents*. Thus, how ‘organic’ is defined and understood in the wider contexts of food production and consumption depends not only on how the movements and its members construct their identity, but also on how others such as the state, biochemical companies and the commercial food industry attempt to represent it. This is the case for all movements, as observed by Melucci, ‘collective identity contains an unresolved and unresolvable tension between the definition a movement gives itself and the recognition granted to it by the rest of society’ (1996: 74). In fact, for a social movement to evolve ‘there must be at least a minimal degree of reciprocity of social recognition between the actors (movement, authorities, other movements, third parties) even if it takes the form of a denial, a challenge, or an opposition’ (Melucci, 1996: 73). Otherwise, the movement risks marginalisation and being reduced to a deviant phenomenon that does not warrant being taken seriously (della Porta and Diani, 1999). For social movements, this means that what is important is ‘the ability of their members to impose certain images of themselves, and to counter attempts by dominant groups to denigrate their aspirations to be recognised as different’ (ibid, p. 92). In the case of organic farmers, this is particularly relevant, and they have had to struggle to enforce their identity. They have either been dismissed as ‘the beard and sandal brigade’ (in Tovey, 1999), or the word ‘organic’ has been reduced to symbolising conservation rather than an alternative form of food production by the Irish state. This silences the aspects of organic identity that criticise the current system of producing and distributing food. (Tovey, 1999). In this way the tactics of the movement, practices concerning crop rotation and composting, and the avoidance of artificial chemicals for weed control and enhancing soil fertility, are detached from any ideological or political context in which they may have arisen. Such ‘ability to impose negative and stigmatised definitions of the identity of other groups constitutes, effectively, a fundamental mechanism of social domination’ (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 92). This, della Porta and Diani point out, severely restricts the capacity for collective action by members of a movement. Surely, it must also effect the movement’s mobilisation efforts, and prevent potential members from taking on the stigmatised identity.

#### Identity negotiation in the movement
Secondly, organic collective identity is being negotiated within the networks of the organic movement. This takes place at the three levels described above, the formal organisational, the local and the social networks:

a) At the *organisational level*, there is little interaction between the two largest organic associations, and each is critical of the politics of the other. This animosity is the remnants of a bitter feud in the 1980s over the aims and symbols of Irish organic farming. Within each organisation, negotiation takes place mainly through its publications. For examples, in the biggest organic magazines, Organic Matters, published by IOFGA, there has been a recent debate about foxhunting, and whether organic farmers should allow this to take place on their land. Should organic ideology support or oppose fox hunting? Such issues are not taken for granted but need to be negotiated.

b) At the level of the *local organic movement*, identity negotiation takes place through events such as regular discussion groups, workshops and open days, and also through the informal interaction that takes place at movement settings such as local markets and through interaction around buying and selling organic food. At a recent meeting of the governing body of a local organic food outlet and market a discussion took place sparked by a motion to ban Israeli goods from the venue. The proposal, based on the premise that Israel continues to illegally occupy Palestinian land, was met with resistance and a desire to focus on helping other countries to grow organic food. For the moment, this issue remains unresolved among the members of the group. This debate again reflects other ideologies, in this case the debate is between human rights and environmentalism.

c) Finally we can look at the personal or *social level* of the networks of the organic movement. Negotiation at this level includes conversations about other local organic producers who have been stripped of their symbol for having broken the rules. Such stories and discussions help reconstruct a collective identity, reinforcing each other’s beliefs and values. Thus, faced with such diversity of opinions and world views as outlined above, it may be easier to identify as a common entity if there is an ‘other’ to identify themselves as distinct from. If they cannot agree on who they are, at least they know who they are not. Other ‘enemies’ discussed and criticised in informal contact include multinational corporations such as Monsanto or McDonalds, or the process of globalisation itself. All of these have also been vilified in the literature of the organic movement.

*Identity negotiation in the individual*

Contradictions in organic identity need to be managed, negotiated and maintained by the individual member. As mentioned above, for many, being ‘organic’ is not their only identity or affiliation, and for some, organic may be less of a goal in itself and more of a tool for other interests. An example is Christopher, a vegetarian rare breeds farmer, who has several different identities: He is a local man who converted from conventional farming eight years ago. He feels that since he has started selling vegetables at the local farmers market, the local non organic community have begun regarding him as ‘one of those foreigners’ who ‘aren’t even real farmers’. He adds that he probably has more in common with them anyway. Yet, he mainly sees himself not as an organic producer, but as a small farmer, and for him being organic is a way of surviving financially. For those for whom organic is their main identity, there is still negotiation required. One organic grower explains some of the choices he had to make when deciding to ‘go organic’:

> I started off looking at biodynamics but I decided it wasn’t really for me, some of the stuff they do, involving animals’ intestines and guts and so on [...] there are strange things that you put herbs into and then bury for certain periods in the ground, it’s a bit like homeopathy for land. And it does make sense, if it works it works, and the people that use it swear that it works, you know, so I wouldn’t knock it, but I just don’t do it. It doesn’t quite go along with vegetarianism either.
So another aspect of Tommy’s own identity, being a vegetarian has influenced his choice of what type of organic producer he should be. In practice, identity negotiation is often embedded in everyday choices. For many consumers, this means a constant evaluation of several main aims, most often health and environment. One consumer at a co-op considers what ‘organic’ means to her. She replies, ‘Free from chemical fertiliser and pesticides’. And she continues, ‘I always try to buy Irish’. When asked if she would buy imported organic apples over local non organic ones, she considers this and replies, ‘maybe if the organic ones were two euros more, then I’d buy Irish’ and laughs. She is searching for a way to justify her decision, and finds, in this case, a financial reason. She continues, ‘if I got two organic apples and some Irish ones, I’d give the organic ones to the children and eat the Irish ones myself. Yeah, that’s what I’d do’. Here, different values of environmentalism, localism, and motherhood counteract, and as a committed organic consumer she must negotiate these in her daily practices of buying food for her family. Networks can introduce members to such different values and ideas. Their multiplicity means that different views and issues can be shared among a wide range of people who would otherwise not come into contact with such information. One organic farmer explains his network of other organic producers:

They’re interested in a lot of things, like, I suppose, Mark now is very interested in oil, d’you know, how expensive it’s going to get, it’s always interesting to talk to him about things like that. And people come up here to the stall and they’ll tell you about, I don’t know, about starvation in Sudan or whatever, things I might not know anything about but it’s interesting all the same. I mean, it gets depressing sometimes, but you know, people do, and if you go off the street into the supermarket or you go into a butchers, they’re not talking about things like that. They’re not talking about anything really, like.

[Christopher, organic beef and vegetable producer, market trader, Cork]

Loose networks, internal conflict and processes of identification

Mische (2003) has suggested that multiple allegiances can create conflicts of identity and power struggles. For the organic food movement, with such a diversity of identities and interests, the danger is that conflicts may cause the breakdown of communication. Organic farming can potentially empower farmers who are otherwise dependent on scientific experts and agrifood corporations in the conventional system of industrialised food production. The movement therefore must mobilise conventional farmers into its networks. As individuals, these agents are already embedded in other networks and relationships. They bring with them interests, ideologies and identities that do not necessarily fit in the organic ‘frame’. The history of the Irish organic movement reveals friction caused by nationalist symbols and commercialisation in the 1980s, when indigenous Irish farmers joined the organic movement, which had until then consisted mainly of immigrants with highly ideological motivations (Moore, 2003). The movement has still not completely recovered from the national organisation splitting in two in 1991. Such a breakdown of networks may be explained by Diani’s concept of segmentation - ‘the extent to which communication between actors is prevented by some kind of barrier’ (2003:306). A particular form, issue distance, the ‘differences in the levels of interest in specific issues’ (2003:306) is exemplified by those who want to develop the commercial aspects of organics and those who are focussed on a holistic organic lifestyle. An example of ideological segmentation - where ‘the relational distance increases with the difference in ideological stances between actors’ (ibid.) – is illustrated by an interview with a commercial organic grower, who identifies herself as different to certain other members in the organic movement whom she calls ‘backyard gardeners’; people who are highly ideological about food production, but who do not themselves grow to sell. She recalls a recent encounter during an open day on an organic farm:
AJ: were you able to chat to any of [the people at the open day]?

C: I was and I wasn’t, there were a couple of people there, and you knew by them, they were these, ‘few things out the back’ like. I can spot them a mile off, and I don’t know, I looked at them and I thought, ‘look, just walk away’, cos I was tempted to say something that I’d regret later. But, they think they know everything like, you could even hear them tell [organic farmer] how to plant spuds you know, and this man he is a very good grower, a very successful grower, and here they were telling him what to do and I just heard this and I thought, no, just walk away.

When asked to elaborate on the differences between herself and such ‘backyard gardeners’, she explained:

It’s my living. I mean they’re doing it for a bit of a hobby, I mean, I’ve no problem and they’re great to do it like, but the difference is that this is our living, [...] you know, [they’ll be] telling you to go out and hoe and you have an acre to do.

[Cathy, organic vegetable grower and market trader, Dublin]

An in-dept interview with this producer revealed that her main reason for converting to organic farming was that it would help her preserve her livelihood and her identity as a small farmer. On the other hand, the people she refers to in the above quotes seem to be organic as part of a commitment to a broader environmentalism. In this example the two worldviews seem to have clashed over the use of machinery, in particular tractors, which use oil and emit harmful Co2 gasses. As a commercial organic grower the interviewee feels alienated by the ideological but impractical methods valued by those whose identity may be more environmental activist than food producer. The result is that she ‘walks away’ rather then engage in debate with them.

However, even this grower was able to gain some useful information and reinforcement of her values from the event she attended, through discussions she held with the farmer who hosted that open day, and who, like her, is a commercial grower. We find other examples of more explicit positive identification. For instance, the story told by an organic consumer who moved to Dublin from London:

So I arrive in this country and it’s strange, like, the only people I know are the in-laws, and they’re all a lot older, it’s like hanging out with your mum and dad, that generation, it’s kind of strange, they all play golf, they’re from completely different backgrounds than me. So we’d heard of this thing [organic food outlet / market], so we found it within a couple of months of being here, and we went down to sort of shop really, and to see what was going on, and just sort of felt at home, it was people you could recognise, they dressed like you, they were people that I could understand, (...) the topic of conversation would be different, they weren’t talking about golf, they weren’t talking about houses. They were talking about things that I was interested in.

He concludes that becoming involved in this outlet of organic food has given him a sense of belonging:

Without it I wouldn’t be here, six months and I would have gone home.

[Mike, organic consumer and employee in organic food outlet, Dublin]

Regulating organic identity
A tension exists within the organic movement between a fluid, open definition of its identity and a more strict, exclusive one. On the one hand, being certified organic means following reasonably strict production criteria, on the other, being ‘organic’ is a lifestyle choice which centres upon the avoidance of chemicals, genetically modified organisms and wasteful use of resources in the production and distribution of food, but which will differ according to personal interpretation and individual negotiations as described above. This second interpretation is based on the belief that sustainability is achievable through many different means. It is seen in debates and considerations regarding the boundaries of organic. Many highly ideological organic farmers identify themselves as different from what they call ‘REPS farmers’. The name stems from the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme, (which gives grants and rewards farmers financially for environmentally friendly practices). Almost all organic farmers subscribe to this scheme. But some members are suspicious of others who may join the REPS scheme for financial reasons, but who do not share organic ideology. They are seen as the ‘free riders’ (Olson, 1971) of the organic movement, conventional farmers who make only the minimum changes to their practices in order to reap the benefits of conversion to organic. For example, they may continue selling their produce through the conventional system. Such an attitude is reflected in the comment on conversion which was found numerous times throughout the research:

You’ve actually got to convert the farmer before you convert the farm, you know, cos there’s no point in converting the farm if the farmer is just looking at it saying, ooooh, I’m not allowed do this or that, (...) that’s not the way.
[Isabelle, organic beef farmer, Cork]

In other words, simply following the basic rules for organic production does not make a person ‘organic’. However, others are more lenient, and for them ‘organic’ is a more inclusive term. When asked to comment on the so-called ‘REPS farmers’, Tommy deliberates:

They’re organic, they’re not organic the way I’m organic, but then again, I’m not organic the way [a biodynamic farmer] is organic. I don’t think, I wouldn’t start looking down on them because they only did it because its part of the REPS scheme. I think the amount of pollution, the amount that’s seeping down into the ground water, into the rivers, if that reduces quite dramatically, as it would if more if them took that step from REPS, or even REPS itself is a step in the right direction. So I think it all contributes, so I think it would be very, you know, snobby to say, oh no, they’re not real organic farmers.
[Tommy, details above]

There is in the movement a debate over how mobilisation should occur, and what the long term goals should be. On one hand, environmental sustainability by any means would consider any form of organic farming an advantage. On the other, building an organic local food economy can only happen through the ideological conversion of conventional farmers, and would therefore exclude those who convert but continue selling into the commercial system. The organic movement has sought to resolve tensions over identity by introducing a set of regulations for organic production and a certification and inspection scheme to identify its members. Producers must follow certain rules and allow a yearly inspection. In return they receive an organic symbol, which can be displayed or quoted when selling produce. This symbol scheme helps channel resources into the movement, especially financial aid from the European Union, which reaches farmers through the REPS Scheme. However, by introducing a strict membership criteria, the organic organisations have taken a step away from representing a social movement, according to Diani’s criteria outlined at the outset of this paper. While the regulations for production mirror the ideological concerns of chemicals and GMOs, the rules are based on production criteria only. Whereas the associations support and recommend local food systems, these are not included in membership criteria. The regulations therefore represent only one aspect of the movement ideology. A production based definition
facilitates mobilisation of conventional farmers who do not have to break with the conventional ways of selling their produce. Other identities based around a traditional farming lifestyle, rather than environmental activism, have entered organics. Concerns such as Cathy’s have been allowed to dominate, and social critiques of the food system are being pushed to the side. This form of organic identity also leaves the movement open to the influence of other forces, especially those seeking a more moderate public understanding of the term ‘organic’.

**Conclusion**

Like many other contemporary social movements, the Irish organic movement is made up of fluid, flexible networks, where members take on multiple allegiances, belonging also to other groups and associations. Such overlapping memberships can help the circulation between movements - and between movements and the wider community – of skills, values and other resources. However, they can also lead to conflicts of interests or power struggles and they necessitate the constant (re)negotiation of individual and collective identities. The diverse networks of organic farming, in these negotiations, become a battleground over ideas, meanings and practices. As we have seen, ‘organic identity’ is less than straightforward, requiring continual negotiation according to conflicting values and beliefs. The complex networks of the organic movement are made up, not only of communicative practices, but also of constant mutual identification, where people recognise those with whom they have more in common, and build alliances and relationships with them, while avoiding other on the basis of negative identification. When positive identification occurs it is based on a broader understanding of what it means to be organic. Negative identification is based on more specific issues and on conflicting ideas about how organic ideology should be translated into actual farming and distribution practices. Such more definite versions of what it means to be organic restrict the openness of the networks of the movement, and can lead to their cessation. However, as some networks break down, other are forged. The structural form of the movement is therefore constantly evolving. The opportunities thus created continue to allow a wide variety of people appropriate the skills of organic farming and suit it to their needs. They also allow the movements opponents, such the state and commercial food producers and processors to challenge or modify the meanings of ‘organic’. Organic identity therefore is no longer only negotiated within the networks of the movement, but also (re)created by other agents outside the movement. It is therefore moving further and further away from the ideological basis on which it was first negotiated.

**References**


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ii All names and identifying details have been replaced.

iii While buying Irish can – and does, at times - reflect the values of nationalism, in the context of the organic movement it most frequently signifies a commitment to localisation and the shortening of food miles.