

Values in organic farming

Erosion or Renewal?

The debate about standards

The study focuses on the recent debate about what is, or what constitutes, organic farming and what is the right path for organic farming in the future.

With the growth in recruitment of new organic farmers, the private standard became a controversial issue in the debate about the practises and values underlying organic farming in the late 1990s.

The long-established and the pioneer organic farmers considered private rules and inspection of organic farms as being a core point and maybe the most important in keeping organic farming on the right path. The newcomers, often having a solid background in conventional farming, questioned the rationale for maintaining the private standard as a supplement to the state standard.

The study is based on a critical discourse analysis of the controversy about maintaining or suspending the private standard for organic farming unfolded in the Danish magazine Organic Farming (Økologisk Jordbrug) from the late 1990s till the summer of 2005.

Discourse can be understood as a way to make sense of the world. Strategically, the analysis aims to identify and analyze how discourses find expression in the strategies which actors pursue, or favour, to further change in a wanted or given direction (Fairclough et al., 2004).

“Those who are organized in the Danish Association of Organic Agriculture, are to be those who will develop organic farming. We are not interested in concept organic farmers that only care about complying with the rules.”



The ideological discourse

“The good future” of organic farming can be understood in different discursive colours!

“It is causing problems and confusion with two set of rules ... We ought to suspend our own rules and inspection and comply with the rules laid down by the state and EU.”



The market economic environmental discourse

“The goals have failed inasmuch as we have moved more and more away from them the later years.”

“There are too many idealists in The Danish Association of Organic Agriculture”

“I see it as a victory for the Association that we have got to this point that the state can take over the administration and the bureaucracy, and that we can focus on the idealistic and professional development of our profession, of course in the expectation that we can continue a close and constructive cooperation with the authorities”

“I know none in the Association that do not want to be an organic farmer by heart. However I know a lot that also need to make a living of it! Heart and mind must live with each other in patient balance.”



The ecological modernisation discourse

The ideological discourse on organic farming

From the establishment of the Danish Association of Organic Agriculture in 1981 till the late 1990s, the ideological discourse on organic farming was dominant. It was a discourse based on values and principles of resource management, recirculation, diversity, proximity, health, animal welfare and the life quality of the organic farmers. The private standard can be seen as an institutionalization of these values and principles into a set of practical guidelines for organic farming. After the establishment of the Danish state rules and regulation of organic farming in 1987, the private standard for organic farming was maintained and enhanced with the aim to secure a continuous tightening of the state standard for organic farming.

The market economic environmental discourse on organic farming

An interview study of new organic farmers, both members and non-members, in 1998 indicated that the newcomers had another view of the private standard than that of the long-established organic farmers. In particular, the newcomers made the point that “there are too many idealists in The Danish Association of Organic Agriculture” (Organic Farming, No. 185, 1998). For the newcomers the private standard was not a legitimate theme. The newcomers clearly did not perceive the state as being an opponent that the organic movement needed to keep under continuous pressure in order to make the state standard more in line with the core organic values and principles.

The newcomers represent four different themes:

1. Organic farming shall not be described as a critique of conventional farming,
2. Economic growth is not inconsistent with organic farming,

3. The state is included in and not an opponent of advancing organic farming, and
4. Organic farming shall be governed by environmental and economic sustainability, and not by idealistic targets or visions.

The ecological modernisation discourse on organic farming

The arguments for maintaining the private standard underwent a major change at the beginning of the new millennium. While the arguments for maintaining the private standard in the late 1990s was related to keeping the state standard on the right path, at the turn of the millennium the motivation for maintaining it became linked to the weakened demand for organic products and a question of furthering the sale of organic products.

The chairman opposed a proposal from the Danish Minister of Agriculture about harmonization with EU regulations on organic farming by proposing IOAS accreditation as an alternative to suspend the private Danish standard. The argument advanced was that “it is important that we maintain the ownership to organic farming” (Organic Farming, No. 224, 2001). This idea, however, was later given up. In stead, the chairman argued for the suspension of the private standard and to replace it with ten prioritized targets for professional development. The proposal was motivated with the words: “I see it as a victory for the Association that we have got to this point that the state can take over the administration and the bureaucracy, and that we can focus on the idealistic and professional development of our profession, of course in the expectation that we can continue a close and constructive cooperation with the authorities” (Organic Farming, No. 274, 2002).

At the annual meeting in spring 2003, the private standard for organic farming was suspended (Organic Farming, No. 283, 2003).

Conclusion

The analysis indicates that the change in discourse opened the way for new perspectives and strategies, as it facilitated the initiation of a dialogue with a larger group of organic farmers. However, the intention of developing organic farming with respect to the original values will depend on how the prioritized targets are set and how they are implemented.

In the discussion about which targets to prioritize, the Board, drawing on ecological modernisation discourse, tried to balance the economic considerations and the original values underlying organic farming. The values were not debated in a development perspective about what would constitute organic farming in the future.

The analysis clearly indicates that a set of values that are shared by all the members of the Association do not exist.

The members, drawing on the ideological discourse, warn about what they call ‘the slippery path’, where the values will erode to the credit of economic considerations.

We agree that the discussion about the original values is important in the debate on how to modernize organic farming. However, as the values often are implicit in the discussions among the farmers drawing on the ideological discourse, and only slightly related to current market conditions, we see a risk that the values will never come into play.

References
Fairclough, N., P. Graham, J. Lemke & R. Wodak (2004). Critical Discourse Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 2004, pp. 1-7.
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