

A Short History of Organic Farming: From Reaction to Innovation

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The organic farming movement is heralded as among the most dynamic and promising forces in contemporary agriculture today: after more than a decade of exponential growth, global organic food sales have continued to inch upwards in the face of widespread economic recession; the sophistication, effectiveness, and productivity of organic methods have become so impressive as to spur widespread (if partial) adoption of organic techniques and technologies by non-organic farmers; while policies and research agendas in support of organic agriculture are becoming more firmly legitimated and institutionalized. Yet it is by no means clear that organic agriculture is on its way to dominating agricultural practice. On the one hand, all three of these trends raise concerns among organic advocates about the perils of “conventionalization”; on the other hand, concurrent trends within non-organic farming (notably the continued release of new varieties of genetically modified crops) pose significant threats to the future viability of organic agriculture as we know it.

This project argues that an understanding of the history of organic agriculture is essential to future agricultural sustainability, and that in a particular sense: that ultimately the most significant innovations observable within organic farming movements since the beginning of the 20th century represent not simply a rejection of certain agricultural inputs, or even the embrace of a broad idea of soil health, but the articulation of a set of attitudes and strategies relating to agricultural management, knowledge production and communication. The goal is to connect academic histories of “the idea of organic farming” with practitioners’ understandings of the conditions under which organic methods are in fact developed and perfected.

The organic farming movement began in the early twentieth century as a reaction *against* proposed and perceived changes in mainstream agricultural practice: the introduction of synthetic fertilizers, the shortening of rotations, the increased consumption of canned and processed foods, the growth of urban areas, the dwindling of agricultural populations and the concomitant loss of widespread, meaningful connections to rural work and rural life. Many of today’s organic advocates, however, emphasize organic farming’s forward-looking orientation, insisting that organic agriculture is not to be understood as a return to the farming practices of yesteryear. The contemporary attitude is in part a response to the active antagonism faced by organic advocates until quite recently—a polarizing influence that tended to efface the contributions of “conventional” farmers to the development (or the preservation) of non-chemical

methods. Arguments for and against organic agriculture likewise reflect the turbulent political atmosphere of its founding era, with organic advocates to this day including both conservatives and radicals, traditionalists and progressives.

Organic agriculture can thus be observed to occupy a particular relationship to history: one in which the characterization of “traditional” farming, the valuation of the past, is always politically charged. Organic agriculture is a product of modernity—at once a questioning of scientific and technological innovations and a reaffirmation of the idea that human material and social relationships can be improved and perfected. At the same time, many of the key tensions within the organic movement have also been key points of fruitful exchange: between rural communities and urban élites; between established farmers and new recruits; between mysticism and mainstream science; between overtly commercial orientations and ideals of self-sufficiency; between a strictly defined “organic” agriculture and more loosely defined notions of “sustainable” agriculture.

This book will argue that the nature and significance of the organic movement can only be understood through a joint evaluation of the development of organic ideology and the elaboration of organic practice—the latter of which often drew on very different agronomic touchstones than the former. Is it indeed accurate to talk about the “dramatic expansion” of organics over the past two decades, given (for instance) contrary evidence suggesting a significant *loss* in numbers of self-identifying organic farmers in the United States since the 1970s? What are and what have been the major barriers to the adoption of organic methods by greater numbers of farmers? In what ways has organic agriculture genuinely challenged and transformed the practice of agricultural research? What place should be granted to innovations in marketing, as opposed to innovations in production, within the success of the organic movement?