From Sandals to Suits: Green Consumers and the Institutionalisation of Organic Agriculture

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First came the story that salmonella in chickens was contaminating British eggs; then listeria was found in cook-chill foods and cheeses; more recently the panic has switched to beef, which, allegedly, may be polluted with BSE. In between food terrorists have tried to hold manufacturers and supermarkets to ransom by contaminating foods with glass and antifreeze. These uncertainties have had dramatic short-term effects on patterns of consumption, as well as causing long-term shifts in shopping and eating habits (Bell and Valentine 1997; 51).

Introduction

As the above quote suggests, many of us have become increasingly concerned about the safety aspects of the foods we ingest, and in particular their nutritional and health qualities, as well as the implications of their production upon the environment. This trend is reflected exceptionally by the recent expansion of the organic agriculture and food industries. The emergence of this industry marks a striking challenge to current scientific forms of agriculture and food production that have arisen from the Industrial Revolution, reliant upon off-farm inputs including capital intensive chemicals and machinery. Thus, organic agriculture represents a site of resistance to industrial farming methods which dominate Western systems of food and agriculture production. Concomitantly, the growth within the organic consumer movement also reflects resistance to the quality and types of food products derived from modern systems of agriculture. Reflecting this opposition, the genesis of the organics movement has largely occurred within the margins of broader changes occurring throughout agriculture and food systems. Whilst remaining peripheral in terms of the proportion of total agricultural production and food sales, the organic industry has become increasingly formalised and institutionalised throughout the last few decades, and thus integrated within conventional food systems. These processes of institutionalisation are particularly evident in Australia and New Zealand.

This chapter will begin by tracing the various changes that have occurred throughout the organics movement, leading to its institutionalisation and formalisation as an industry. Importantly, the history of this movement highlights the centrality of the meanings of food (beyond its nutritional content), in shaping food consumption patterns. In particular, constructions of organic food as both environmentally responsible and healthy have led to rapid growth within the organic industry. Concomitantly, conceptualisations of agricultural change, and in particular the expansion of organic systems of food provision, are complemented by incorporating the study of food within our understandings, by enabling us to think about the meanings of food.

Sites of Resistance - A History of the Organics Movement

The organic agriculture and food movement that began to expand early this century, represents resistance to chemical intensive farming methods that emerged during the
Industrial Revolution. Such methods include the widescale application of agri-
chemicals and mechanical innovations, selective breeding techniques and most
recently genetic engineering. Whilst promising improvements to agriculture, each of
these strategies carry ecological, health and social baggage, made manifest in
exacerbating levels of land degradation, increased rates of leukemia related to agri-
chemical exposure and declining rural communities. In spite of these excesses, such
methods of scientific production have been rigorously promoted by both Australian
and New Zealand governments since the late nineteenth century in an attempt to
maintain and improve production efficiency (Barr and Cary 1992, Campbell 1996,
Lawrence 1987, Tennant 1978). Additionally, these chemical intensive farming
methods have been heralded by government and research institutions as the means of
addressing the challenges posed by the adoption European farming methods within
unsuitable landscapes. Continued acceptance and encouragement of these strategies
has in turn enabled their normalisation, whilst organic systems - representing the
antithesis to conventional agriculture - are ridiculed and discredited, and consequently
constrained from expansion.

As an outcome of these constraints, the genesis of the organic agriculture industry
throughout the 1920s and 1940s has been located at the periphery. Concomitantly,
membership within this organic movement represents the rejection of dominant
conventional approaches to agriculture, whilst embracing those practices evolving
from practical work and research located within these margins (Belasco 1989,James
1993). Whilst there was much research occurring throughout this period, Rudolf
Steiner, an Austrian scientist and philosopher, has played a seminal part in the
expansion of organic and biodynamic\(^1\) farming (James 1993). In particular, the
teachings of Steiner have formed a significant basis for the development of alternative
farming methods throughout Europe and the rest of the world. His teachings now
form the standards outlined by the Bio-Dynamic Agricultural Association, an
international certification body for bio-dynamic growers.

In addition to this work undertaken by key people and the continued experimentation
by growers, an array of journal and book publications began to emerge, alongside the
establishment of national organic associations throughout this period. Whilst the
organic movement remained in the margins, these changes enabled its continued
expansion. This work was driven by growers and researchers concerned with the
environmental and health impacts of agriculture and food production. In particular, in
1940 J.I. Rodale began promoting the benefits and methods of organic farming
through the journal *Organic Farming*, later re-named *Organic Gardening and
Farming* (Belasco 1989). Experimentation occurring in Australia was also marked by
the publication by P.A. Yeomans in the 1950s, which was critical of artificial
fertilisers, and focussed upon building up the quality of the soil naturally (Barr and
Cary 1992). Throughout this period Bill Mollison also began research and practice
with permaculture systems\(^2\). The publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in

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\(^1\) Biodynamic farming methods were devised by Rudolf Steiner. These methods include the application
of dynamic sprays and compost starters from organic substances in order to enhance growth.

\(^2\) Permaculture is based upon a philosophy of permanent self sustaining and regenerating agricultural
systems, based upon household and community self reliance. Permaculture principles have been
embraced by many people in urban communities, who are unhappy with the scientific and
technological dependence predominant throughout contemporary agricultural practices. (Mollison
1962 which emphasised the destruction of wildlife throughout the US directly related to the use of pesticides, fungicides and herbicides, has also been a landmark text in furthering the expansion of the organic agriculture movement. Also reflecting growing interest in organic methods, an array of organic groups began to establish throughout this period, beginning in 1946 with the formation of the British Soil Association, followed in 1955 by the Henry Doubleday Research Association (Great Britain), in an effort to promote organic growing (James 1993). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s formalised organic consumer and grower organisations further expanded worldwide (Campbell 1996).

In addition to this expansion in organics research and groups supporting organic agriculture, heightened awareness of the environmental, health and social impacts of chemical intensive forms of agriculture also led to the expansion of other low input systems of food and fibre production. Throughout the 1960s Integrated Pest Management (IPM) systems which were reliant upon biological pest controls began to be developed, thus reducing dependence upon chemicals. More recently, producers have adopted IPM as a strategy for maintaining access to markets with tightening health and environmental standards (McKenna 1998). Although still occurring under the umbrella of scientific research, the expansion of IPM marks a shift from chemical intensive regimes of food production.

The genesis of the organic agriculture movement (and other low input systems) throughout this century, indicates its expansion has been driven by growers with concerns related to the effects of chemical intensive practices upon the soil, and increasingly by concerns related to the impacts of industrial food production upon the nutritional content of foods (Ritchie and Campbell1996). However, in addition to these continued grower concerns related to farm practices, consumer awareness of the relations of food production has also increased the demand for organic and wholefoods. Consequently, the period throughout the 1960s and1970s marks a distinct shift in the driving forces behind the organic movement, by including consumers more specifically in this process. These consumers began to demand accountability for food production processes, largely in response to the growing awareness of chemical residues in foods, spurred on by food scares such as the massive DDT residue scare between 1969 and 1972 (Belasco 1989), in addition to the increased distancing of consumers from sites of food production (Belasco 1989). As a consequence of the culmination of these driving forces - represented by both organic producers and consumers - politically and economically viable alternative food distribution networks were established. Importantly, this growth initiated expansion in the variety of organic produce available, as well as its distribution channels.

Non profit food co-operatives began to boom throughout the early 1970s particularly in the US, providing bulk organic foods to concerned consumers (Belasco 1989). Communes and households also started grouping together to form informal networks to purchase bulk organic foods. Establishment of food co-ops and informal networks represented a challenge to, and criticism of, the dominant food distribution and retailing system characterised by centralisation, long distance transportation, over-processing and lengthy storage of foods (Belasco 1989, Clunies-Ross 1990). Conversely, food co-ops stocking organic foods were decentralised, focusing on the distribution of unprocessed foods to local markets. Foods supplied through co-ops
also offered traceability from the farm gate to the consumer, with co-op members providing information to consumers on “lists of ingredients, nutritional content, recipes, but also of the political situation where this fruit was grown or this egg was laid” (Belasco 1989, 90). These characteristics of food co-ops and the foods they supplied, clearly differentiated them from preceding food systems (Belasco 1989, Clunies Ross 1990). Concomitantly, the emergence of this countercuisine - characterised by the production of diverse organic products and their distribution through local networks - has led to the politicisation of food. In addition to supplying these foods, food co-ops also provided a safe haven in which many of these political issues related to food production, distribution and consumption could be discussed. The popularity of these sites of resistance is reflected in the more recent expansion of wholefood restaurants, including the Home Comfort Restaurant, Mother Courage Restaurant and The Moosewood Restaurant throughout America (Belasco 1989), as well as Squirrels Vegetarian Restaurant in Australia. Similar to food co-ops, these restaurants undertook two important functions; the provision of organic and wholefoods to consumers, as well as providing a social milieu for discussion of political issues, particularly those related to food production and consumption (Belasco 1989). Many of these restaurants also publish vegetarian cookbooks, thus further increasing the accessibility of organic and wholefoods.

The genesis of this movement highlights the significant expansion in both organic production and consumption throughout this century. Importantly, this growth has occurred within the margins, as organics continues to represent a challenge to dominant systems of food provision reliant upon scientific and technical innovations. However, whilst remaining marginal in terms of the proportion of total agricultural production, throughout the last two decades organic food systems have come to resemble their conventional counterparts in many ways. This is evidenced in the increasing formalisation and institutionalisation of organic food production and distribution systems. Central to these processes has been the formation of fee membership organic certification bodies, government regulations, as well as involvement by food processing companies. These changes have in turn expanded the distribution of organic produce on a global scale, thus integrating organics within broader agricultural production and trade relations. These changes then, mark an important shift for the organic movement, and its repositioning as a formalised industry. Tracing recent expansion within the organic agriculture industry in Australia and New Zealand highlights this incorporation within ‘mainstream’ agricultural networks.

**Growth of the Organic Agriculture Industry in Australia**

Recent expansion of the organic agriculture industry throughout Australia and New Zealand is evident in the increasing number of growers undertaking organic methods, the area of land under organic production, as well as increased interest by State and trans-global bodies in regulating the industry. Whilst in 1990 there were 491 certified organic growers identified throughout Australia, this number had increased...
to 862 by 1995 (RIRDC 1996). The majority of these growers are located in NSW (41%), followed by Queensland (20%), South Australia (18%) and Victoria (10%) (RIRDC 1996). More particularly, the major organic producing areas in Australia include western Victoria, northern New South Wales and Central Queensland for wheat, the Murray and Murrumbidgee irrigation areas for rice, and central Victoria for milk (Dumaresq and Greene 1997). The significant growth of this industry is also indicated in the increased value of the organic market, rising from $28 million in 1990 to $80.5 million by 1995. Although difficult to quantify, the potential organic export industry may well reach over $200 million (Monk 1998). The area under organic production has also increased from 150 000 to 335 000 hectares throughout this same period (RIRDC 1996). This significant increase in the area under organic cultivation is predominantly attributed to the recent adoption of organic farming practices on large scale broadacre farms.

Alongside this growth, beginning in the early 1980s a number of organic growers also began to establish organic certification bodies, in an attempt to regulate producers, processors and retailers involved in this expanding industry. To date six nationally recognised organic certification bodies exist in Australia, as well as a number of other smaller groups. These recognised bodies include; the Bio-Dynamic Research Institute of Australia, the Biological Farmers of Australia, the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Organic Herb Growers of Australia and Organic Vignerons of Australia (Lovisolo 1997). Alongside the evolution of these bodies, interest is now shown by food processing companies, including Uncle Tobys (see Lyons 1999), Berrivale, Bunge, Sandhurst and Nugans (Monk 1998). These food processing companies have facilitated significant changes within the organic industry, including expanding distribution channels as well as the variety of organic produce available.

Additionally, in 1990 the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) established the Organic Produce Advisory Committee (OPAC) to develop and administer a national standard for organic produce (Lyon 1994, Lovisolo 1997). OPAC is comprised of members from AQIS, the National Farmers Federation, the Australian Federation of Consumer Organisations, the Standing Committee on Agriculture as well as representatives from organic certification bodies. The purpose of this partially government funded committee is to provide an export accreditation system for organic produce in order to facilitate trade of organic products (Lovisolo 1997). As part of this mission, OPAC provides and oversees an internationally recognised government approved set of standards for organic produce, which are equivalent to the guidelines stipulated in Codex and EU Regulation (Lovisolo 1994, 1997). OPAC has also established accreditation procedures for the production, labelling, processing and handling of organic produce (Clarke 1991). These standards are audited by the Export Control (Organic Certification) Orders. This government support in the form of a national standard however, reflects a strategy to expand export earnings rather than a particular interest in organics. Importantly however, the establishment of this regulatory structure does represent a historical break from government ridicule of organics, alongside an at least partial acknowledgment of organics as a legitimate farming system.

undertake organic farming methods but are not certified, within Australia there exist a number of certification bodies that are not yet recognised by AQIS, and information on farm sizes may be inaccurate.
Growth of the Organic Industry in New Zealand

Similar to Australia, the number of certified organic growers in New Zealand has also increased substantially over the last decade. Whilst in 1988, 89 growers were registered as certified organic, this number had increased to 289 growers by 1997 (Saunders et al. 1997). The area of land under Bio Gro certification has also increased throughout this period from 7359 to 8860 hectares (Saunders et al. 1997). In addition, it is estimated 2500 hectares is under Demeter certification, adding to a total of 11,500 hectares under organic cultivation throughout New Zealand. In 1997, the majority of this land was under permanent pasture (54%), with significant areas producing mixed crops (31%), and smaller areas under market gardens (3%) and orchards (5%) (Saunders et al. 1997). Estimates of the market value of the organic industry have also risen from NZ $1.1 million in 1991 to $33.5 million by June 1997 (compared to $80.5 million in 1995 for Australia). The export market for New Zealand organic produce generates the major income for this industry, representing NZ $29 million (Saunders et al 1997). This growth in the organic export market has been facilitated in particular by the recent involvement of export companies within the organic industry, such as Heinz Wattie and Zespri International, who combined comprise 63 percent of total exports. These export companies have sought out markets for organic produce, thus encouraging growers to convert to organic methods (Campbell 1996, Campbell et al. 1997). Additionally, Heinz Wattie have also developed a ‘Grow Organic with Watties’ program to further encourage growers to undertake organic practices, in an attempt to meet growing consumer demands for organic frozen vegetables, particularly in countries such Japan and the United States (‘Grow Organic’ 1997). Heinz Wattie indicate they are still chasing more growers to convert to organics in order to supply this un-met demand (‘Grow Organic’ 1997).

In addition to this involvement by corporate interests, the New Zealand government has also recently become involved within the industry in an attempt to expand organic export markets. This interest was first evidenced in 1995 with the establishment of the Organic Products Exporters Group (OPEG), which aims to facilitate trade of New Zealand’s organic produce. OPEG is a joint action group (JAG) established by the New Zealand Trade Development Board (Tradenz) to provide services to producers, retailers and distributors in order to increase exports of organic produce. The OPEG is comprised of a network of businesses, scientific institutions, government agencies and two independent organic certifying bodies (Tradenz 1997). Many people involved in the New Zealand organic industry suggest the increased involvement by large companies, including Heinz Wattie, has encouraged this government support, due to its ability to generate export revenue. Concomitantly, whilst OPEG was established to expand exports of organic produce, there has been little other government support for the industry’s expansion. In particular, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries

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4 ‘Certified organic’ in this case refers to all those growers land certified with Bio Gro New Zealand, as well as a limited number of growers registered with the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association (Demeter). Inaccuracies in these figures have been identified by Saunders et al (1997) for three reasons; grower categorisation of land under organic cultivation may vary year to year, a number of growers are no longer certified with Bio Gro as a consequence of inspection fee increases in 1994, and Demeter has not kept records of land use by area.

5 Zespri International is the marketing subsidiary of the New Zealand Kiwifruit Marketing Board (NZKMB), which is responsible for promoting sales and marketing of New Zealand Kiwifruit.

6 This figure represents only those exports calculated by the Organic Products Exports Group (OPEG). It is estimated there is a further NZ $3-5 million worth of exports outside OPEG calculations.
(MAF) have been removed from growers and their concerns since restructuring of the New Zealand economy in 1984. Consequently, MAF has played no direct part in the expansion of organic farming systems. Although many within the organic movement would like to see MAF establish a national organic standard (similar to that administered by AQIS in Australia), until very recently MAF has shown no interest in this idea.

This recent expansion throughout the Australian and New Zealand organic industry highlights the various ways in which the industry has been formalised, and in turn integrated within conventional agriculture food systems. The involvement of corporate interests and the expansion of systems of regulation (both governmental and non-governmental), have been particularly significant in facilitating this institutionalisation. Concomitantly, these processes have made significant contributions towards expanding the organic industry. Importantly, however, growth in the production of organic foods has been equally met by consumer demands for organic products. In many instances, these consumer demands also outstrip supply, particularly within export markets such as Japan, the United States and Western Europe (Carson 1998).

**Green Consumers and the Expansion of Organics**

This growing consumer interest in organic and other ‘clean and green’ foods, signifies the importance of the social and cultural meanings ascribed to foods in shaping consumption patterns (Tovey 1997). In particular, the demand for organic food reflects the heightened concerns for many consumers related to the environmental and health qualities of the foods they ingest (Lawrence, Lockie and Lyons 1998). Many consumers construct an array of environmental risks associated with modern industrial food production, including soil salinity, nutrient decline and pesticide residues (Lawrence, Vanclay and Furze 1992). The consumption of organic food thus represents an opportunity to avoid these risks. Concomitantly, concerns in relation to the effects of food consumption upon personal health is also a prominent discourse leading to the consumption of organic foods. This increasing demand for foods constructed as uncontaminated, such as organic foods, has occurred alongside the plethora of food scares proliferating throughout the last decade. These scares have raised concerns about the potential health affects arising from the consumption of contaminated foods, including irradiated foods, salmonella infected peanuts, eggs and meat, as well as milk from cows injected with bovine growth hormone (BGH) and pesticide residues (James, 1993; Lupton, 1996). More recent concerns linking the transfer of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) (mad cow disease) with beef consumption further highlight the potential risks associated with food consumption.

Acknowledging these meanings suggests that organic food is more than a generic commodity whose meaning can be taken for granted, but rather it is ascribed an array of nutritional, moral and ethical values variously by consumers, food processors and retailers, which must be identified in conceptualising the changes occurring throughout agriculture. The importance of these meanings is manifest in consumer demands for organic food, as well as the recent activism by consumers in defining organic standards. In particular, throughout those countries, geographic regions, cultures and classes where the meanings ascribed to organics - including health and the environment -figure prominently, the organic market continues to expand. For
example, Japanese consumers significantly influenced by health concerns, have encouraged significant growth within the industry, and the current Japanese organic market is worth an estimated US$500 million (Saunders et. al. 1997). Whilst in Europe, concerns related to food safety and hygiene, largely attributed to the BSE scare, resulted in an organic market share worth an estimated 2700 million pounds by 1995 (Saunders et. al. 1997). Alongside this market growth which highlights the centrality of health and the environment to many food consumers, recent consumer activism also reiterates the importance of the meanings of foods for consumers. This is evidenced in particular by the actions of consumer lobby groups in the US to ban genetically engineered products and irradiated foods from being included under the umbrella of “organic” food (‘USDA Backs Down in organic standards row’ 1998). The letter campaign that generated over 200 000 letters in protest of the proposed national organic standard that would include such products, highlights the importance of the meanings of foods, particularly to consumers. Therefore, understanding the changes occurring within agriculture requires the acknowledgment of these meanings, as they have implications for the types of agricultural products consumers are willing to ingest.

Conclusions
The emergence of the organic food industry represents a challenge to dominant industrial modes of agriculture and food production which are characterised by dependence upon scientific and technical innovations. This chapter has outlined the significant transformations occurring within this industry throughout the last century, including its institutionalisation and incorporation within conventional agriculture and food systems. This is reflected in the evolution of organic certification bodies, alongside growing corporate and government interest in generating profits from the organic industry. This transformation from “sandals to suits” is particularly evident throughout the Australian and New Zealand organic industries. As an outcome of these changes, the organic agriculture and food industry has expanded significantly.

Importantly, the heightened significance of the meanings of food in shaping consumption practices has also facilitated expansion of the organic food industry. In particular, consumers increasing concern with the health and environmental implications of the foods they ingest has led to the increased demand for organic foods. This growing demand has therefore supported expansion of organic food production. Only by acknowledging the meanings of food as thoroughly constituted within the social order, rather than as objective commodities, it is possible to recognise these multiple meanings which shape both consumption and production practices. Therefore incorporation of these meanings into conceptualisations of agricultural change are useful, particularly in the case the of organics.

References


