

Battles for the Soul of Organic: The Grassroots Versus the Suits

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Introduction

Agribusiness apologists ask us to consider how we can feed a world population that is expected to reach nine billion in a few years. All the tools of modern scientific agriculture are needed, they say, and we cannot return to the outmoded and unscientific methods represented by organic farming. Activists who oppose the agribusiness scenario point to mounting evidence that organic farms are as productive as chemical intensive ones, use fewer nonrenewable resources and less energy, protect soil and water quality, treat livestock humanely, and help mitigate climate change by sequestering carbon in soil organic reserves. At the same time many of the same activists attack ‘industrial organic’ companies, and demand stricter standards to maintain ‘organic integrity’ and meet consumer expectations. As a result, young food system activists increasingly believe that the organic label has been ‘hijacked’ by agribusiness and is therefore now meaningless.

Part I – History of organic standard-setting and controversies

The organic community in North America has long been divided along philosophical and ideological lines. While the organic pioneers have mainly been identified with the ‘counterculture’ and its associated political and social movements, increasing mainstream acceptance has resulted in the engagement of more pragmatic and business-oriented players. Many are unaware of the roots of some organic proponents in fascist ideologiesⁱ. Tension between the ‘grassroots’ (small-scale, locally focused organic farming advocates), and the ‘suits’ (middlemen, manufacturers and distributors seeking to profit from the rapidly growing organic sector) has been a continual factor in drawing battle lines over organic standards and requirements, especially with the onset of the Federal regulation.

Regulation of the organic label by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is now nearly universally recognized as a positive achievement with respect to stimulating growth of the market. Its introduction has pulled with it increased organic production along with increased investment in research and public recognition of the benefits of organic agriculture. However, there are those who regard government regulation of the organic movement with suspicion and even hostility, always ready to assume the worst and often finding their suspicions justified. This suspicion has been widely and repeatedly communicated within the progressive social activist community, which has long held as a given (not without justification) that the USDA is a captive of corporate industrial agribusiness interests, as documented by authors such as Marion Nestleⁱⁱ. This suspicion has created a form of self-fulfilling prophecy, and is now threatening to undermine public confidence in the credibility of the organic label.

At the time of writing this chapter, the current economic recession has depressed the growth of the organic market, yet it is still expanding, growing by about 5% annually since 2009, and more recently approaching double digits. In comparison, conventional food sales have been flat or shrinking. However, while organic food (and non-food products) now comprises close to 4% of the food system in the US, at less than 1% it still accounts for a tiny fraction of domestic agricultural production. ⁱⁱⁱ

Many young activists, amplified by popular writers such as Michael Pollan, ^{iv} and by films such as ‘Food, Inc.’^v, regard the USDA organic label as compromised at best, and possibly meaningless. There is also an increasing proliferation of – and confusion about – terms and eco-labels such as ‘natural’, ‘sustainable’,

