

BOOK REVIEW:

GOING ORGANIC: MOBILIZING NETWORKS FOR ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE FOOD PRODUCTION. BY STEWART LOCKIE, KRISTEN LYONS, GEOFFREY LAWRENCE AND DARREN HALPIN. PUBLISHED IN 2006 BY CABI PUBLISHING WALLINGFORD, UK. ISBN: 9781845931322 (HARDBACK) 208PAGES

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The book, *Going Organic*, records a broad based and detailed examination of organic agricultural from a notably Australasian perspective. As such, it provides a refreshing – and potentially revitalising – assessment of a sector that has emerged as a pariah in other contexts (most notably in the popular press, Michael Pollan's condemnation of corporate organic). In fact, the authors position the objective of the book – telling "a more complex story about organic food and agriculture" (p. 2) – as directly opposed to the burgeoning literature that suggests the organic sector is becoming more difficult to distinguish as an alternative form of agricultural production (i.e. the increasing prevalence of the conventionalisation thesis). Thus, their narrative also carries the ambition "to use the experiences of the organic sector to transform more radically the ways in which we produce, distribute and consume on a global scale" (p. 2). In effect, the authors claim to be "putting the organic sector under the microscope" (p. 3) in order to assert its social and environmental benefits. This approach places the book squarely in line with the emerging academic debate around the potential of organic.

Organic agriculture is a topic that has captured the imagination of scientists examining social, agronomic and ecological aspects of agricultural production. As is indicated in *Going Organic*, it has likewise become a vibrant (if relatively insignificant) feature in the marketing and consumption of food and fibre throughout the global economy, often enticing the focus of a variety of media outlets. The attraction of organic agriculture, despite its marginal position in comparison to more 'conventional' agri-food production systems, lies largely in its claims to being an alternative. Not only are organic methods different from more chemically intensive practices, they also promise more positive relations between producers and both the environment and society. Thus, organic agriculture has become the sustainable production system *du jour* with which to challenge the existing values imbued within and assumed successes of more conventional agricultural practice. Early proponents and researchers of organic agriculture alike began to employ justifications of the practice based on the common good, constituted by collective solidarity developed around benefits for the health of the beings consuming its product and interacting with it. The contestation over the most appropriate means of production and its basis of justification exposed the practice of organic agriculture to public tests of these claims (see Rosin and Campbell 2006).

More recent assessments of organic agriculture have exposed some of the deficiencies of its practice within specified contexts. For example, assessments of the ecological

awareness and social responsibility demonstrated by organic producers in California (see Buck, et al. 1997; Guthman 2004) showed that many failed to engage in the precepts of agro-ecological practice and that they increasingly employed exploitative labour practices similar to their conventional counterparts. Research in Canada has also suggested that, while women are more active in the decision making processes on alternative farms (including organic), traditional gendered roles are maintained (Hall and Mogyorody 2007). Furthermore, in Europe, the focus of critique is on the potential for organic agriculture to provide a viable alternative for small farmers. In this perspective, reliance on organic as a means of differentiating the product of small farmers is considered wanting as it is too readily routinised and incorporated within conventional marketing and retailing systems (see, Watts, et al. 2005). By contrast, *Going Organic* offers a uniquely Australasian perspective, following the approach of previous literature (see Campbell and Liepins 2001; Lockie and Halpin 2006; Lyons and Lawrence 2001) that is determined to maintain the distinctiveness of organic producers and their potential to usher in more socially and environmentally appropriate practice.

In *Going Organic*, the authors simultaneously develop a defence and a promotion of the organic sector as a positive alternative to an existing agri-food system fraught with environmental degradation and social exploitation. In the introduction, the objectives of the book are outlined with the presentation organised around the process of mobilisation – that is, a concerted focus on who is involved in organic agriculture and what may encourage a broader participation in the sector. The focus on mobilisation is readily evident in the structure and presentation of the chapters. The main body chapters each apply the authors’ microscopes to specific ‘links’ in the organic food commodity chain and are sandwiched by a chapter “positioning organics” and one discussing “organic futures”. In positioning organics, the authors review existing debates regarding the value and validity of the organic sector (its capacity to provide a socially and environmentally appropriate alternative) focusing, in particular, on the conventionalisation debate and associated concepts of bifurcation, institutionalisation and the potential erosion of standards. Conventionalisation is then discarded as an overly generalising concept that emphasises production while ignoring the complexities of consumption, regulation and promotion.

Following a commodity chain framework, the five central chapters of *Going Organic* examine the condition of organics with reference to: 1) media representations; 2) governance structures; 3) comparative impacts and output potential of production; 4) the tendency toward concentration of distribution and retail actors; and 5) the response of consumers. Each of these chapters discusses both the challenges to the claims to being a positive alternative forwarded by the organic sector and the extent to which these are based in either the misrepresentation or the lack of appropriate data. The balance of these discussions indicate the relative value of organic agriculture as both a practice and as the basis for a more egalitarian and environmentally responsible means of sourcing food for the global population. The state of the sector is represented as being vulnerable to the more powerful actors in the conventional sector, but also potentially resurgent by means of the mobilisation of its proponents. The greatest potential for realising such mobilisation is located in re-establishing the relationships and links between producers and consumers, a finding that leads to the chapter on organic futures.

The future of organics is presented as a competition over claims to the 'green' market. The successful outcome for the sector is dependent on its capacity to project and substantiate its claims to social and environmental responsibility that involves the active participation of readers as interested consumers and academics. In the conclusion the challenges facing the organic sector are reiterated in the form of nine misconceptions, each of which is refuted on the basis of the data presented earlier. The question is then diverted from the relative value and validity of the organic sector as an alternative to the means by which support for the sector and its ideals can be mobilised. To this end, the authors provide five strategies which straddle the whole of the commodity chain (retail pricing, supply chain coordination, positioning and availability of organic foods, certification and labelling and promotion and education). In sum, the organic sector has the potential to thrive as long as a variety of participants are willing to act on its behalf. If any aspect of the book is to be found deficient, it is its lack of an overarching theoretical approach and explanation for the processes that have been so competently documented to construct a compelling narrative for mobilisation.

Overall, *Going Organic* provides an excellent review of the state of the organic food and fibre sector along the whole of the commodity chain. In essence, it holds true to the authors' intent to expose the sector to the microscope as promised in introduction. By presenting the current situation as a series of contested representations of organic and of food and fibre more generally, they establish solid credibility for arguing the necessity to mobilise support for organics. The substantial detail of analysis of respective links in the organic commodity chain also contributes to their claims that the sector is a positive alternative to existing conventional agriculture. As such, the book provides a good introduction to the sector and to the complexity of both the context within which it operates as well as the processes which either promote or constrain its growth. *Going Organic*, thus, is an excellent contribution to the literature on organic agriculture. It is an especially good resource for those beginning their exploration of food and fibre production or as a text for undergraduate-level rural sociology or rural geography courses and its call for mobilisation positions it well for an audience among the general public. Finally, it provides a solid foundation for future examinations of the organic sector and of agri-food systems more generally, including a variety of innovative and incisive analyses and theoretical approaches.

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