
Editorial: Continuity and change in organic farming – Philosophy, policy and practice

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Organic agriculture has witnessed a very dynamic development in the last few years. Its rapid growth has offered the organic sector new opportunities but also raised new questions and challenges. Indeed, the patterns of development are starting to show some diverging trends, indicating that the organic movement is not static and its goals and

practices may evolve with the changing circumstances it faces. This raises the question whether organic farming has been able to change the dominant industrial food system, or to which extent it has been changed by it. The contributions in this Special Issue aim at identifying theoretical and empirical arguments shedding light on the recent developments, highlighting policy implications and pointing towards heterogeneity in organic practices.

Most of the papers included in this issue were initially presented at the XXth Congress of the European Society of Rural Sociology, which was held in Keszthely (Hungary) in August 2005. Sixteen manuscripts were submitted for consideration in this special issue. The review process was rigorous and led to the acceptance of ten papers. These represent a cross-section of European research on organic farming, from North (Norway, Sweden, Denmark) to South (Portugal, Italy) and from West (Ireland) to Central Europe (Austria). They also offer insights into the three areas where change is most apparent: the philosophy, discussed here as organic farming's goals and the different concepts of what 'organic farming' is; the policy, analysing how organic farming can be coopted by agricultural policy and what policy instruments may further its development; as well as practices, looking at both the organic farmers and the consumers.

Alrøe and Noe point out that when discussing organic farming, the specific perspective from which it is discussed must be made transparent. For example, organic farming can be seen as a protest against conventional agriculture, as a self-organising system that sustains itself through an on-going recreation of meaning or as a market niche, where organic products are just expected to comply with a set of standards. Communicating directly across different perspectives will be difficult as the concepts and logic of one perspective cannot be translated into another. Alrøe and Noe propose the polyocular approach as an analytical tool to handle the plurality of perspectives.

Starting from the observation that organic farming is an explicitly value-based movement working towards a set of goals, Milestad, Wivstad, Lund and Geber offer a detailed analysis on how these goals are implemented in the organic standards in Sweden. They show that an implicit hierarchy of values can be seen in the trade-offs, which are made when goals are operationalised in standards. Also, a number of compromises are made to ensure that the standards are economically feasible and practical, both for farmers and for certifying agencies. All these contribute to create gaps between the goals (which are broad and visionary) and the standards (which must be pragmatic and functional).

Austria prides itself with having the highest share of certified organic farms in the European Union. This allows Schermer to analyse the interrelationship between organic farming institutions and the agricultural sector, once more than 10% of farms are organic. He focuses especially on the attempts by conventional agricultural institutions to appropriate the positive image of organic farming by downplaying the difference between organic and conventional agriculture. Schermer concludes that for further advancement of an ecological modernisation, organic farming needs to develop a distinct profile and engage conventional farming institutions in a constructive dialogue.

Gleirscher focuses on the policy instruments that have enabled the rapid growth of organic farming in Austria. He notes that initially the focus was on direct support for organic farms. However, in the current development phase, support measures at the farm-level are no longer sufficient to ensure the future growth of the sector. During expert workshops, promising policy instruments were identified. These are mostly

indirect policy measures, for example, increasing taxes on pesticides and chemical fertilisers, promoting consumer awareness, improving the advisory services, establishing GMO-free areas or fostering traditional processing methods for organic foods.

When discussing the values of organic farmers, the assumption is sometimes raised that motives for conversion to organic farming by early converters differ from those who have converted in the last few years. In her analysis of focus groups discussions held in five European countries, Padel shows that there is no direct link between time of conversion and values held, that is, recent converters are not necessarily more opportunistic and less ideal-driven than older converters. Rather the changes in framework seem to influence farmers' values, which thus vary for example, by country (agricultural policies, policy support, organic farmer organisation, etc.) or farm type (grassland-based dairying, cropping, mixed-farming). Padel thus emphasises that explanations for changes in farmer motivations should not focus solely on personal characteristics of farmers, but take into account the circumstances in which conversion takes place, especially the economic framework.

Koesling, Flaten and Lien also focus on the determinants of the decision to convert to organic farming. They analyse the results of a written survey of more than thousand Norwegian crop and dairy farmers using multinomial logit models. They show that among the farmers considering conversion, a considerable proportion is attracted to organic farming for financial reasons. However, the farmers' attitudes to the environment strongly influenced the probability of conversion. These findings confirm that adoption of organic farming is not only a question of economic prospects, but also involves lifestyle choices and other ideals.

Organic farming is not only promoted for its environmentally friendly production practices, but also because it can contribute to rural development. Frederiksen and Langer analyse to what extent and in what way organic farmers in Denmark contribute to rural development. They note that the majority of organic farming households are dual-income households, relying economically on off-farm incomes. This, combined with a commitment to farming as a way of life, shows that off-farm work is a means for sustaining and developing farms rather than a first step out of agriculture. About half of the surveyed farms engage in 'other farm-based activities' such as processing farm produce, direct selling, renting-out buildings or leasing fishing rights. Farmers do not engage in these activities primarily for the potential contribution to household income, but rather to secure personal contacts with consumers and other rural inhabitants.

Marketing of organic products was initially based on face-to-face interaction between the producer and the consumer. With the growth of the organic market share, the supply chains have become longer and trust has been replaced by certification and organic labels as a means of communication between producer and consumer. Truninger uses conventions theory to analyse how both trends coexist and interact on the organic food market in Lisbon. She identifies a polarisation of the meaning of organic with certification determining the identity of organics in commercial arrangements whereas small retailers predominantly frame organic foods as transcending regulatory boundaries, emphasising social mechanisms of trust.

Brunori, Cerruti, Medeot and Rossi also analyse how 'quality' is constructed and how it may be influenced by the marketing strategy. Their analysis is based on a comparison of the conventional and organic beef produced in Mugello, Tuscany. On the one hand the conventional beef has been successfully 'relocalised' by the farmer cooperative, by marketing it as a local specialty product and by emphasising

the connection between farming, food and place of production as well as on producer-consumer relations. On the other hand the strategy to market organic beef exclusively through a supermarket chain ultimately led to the appropriation of both the 'alternativeness' of the organic beef and the economic benefits by the supermarket chain. The case study thus gives important insights into the causes and the consequences of organic products being incorporated into the conventional food chain.

Farmer's markets are characterised by the direct link between producer and consumer. As such they have been a preferred selling point for organic producers. However, farmer's markets seem to come under increased pressures which might compromise the integrity of farmer's markets, for example, the increasing 'food miles', the less knowledgeable and connected vendors or the increase in traded as opposed to grown food. Moore analyses how the farmer's markets in Ireland address these pressures in a creative way, seeking to maintain their ideals. He identifies three distinct types of farmer's markets, and shows how the definition of 'organic' is constructed differently by a range of consumers, with differing emphasis on certification or on the social and natural embeddedness of the products.

The authors of this special issue have identified a number of ways in which organic farming has come under pressure and how it has, more or less successfully, tried to address these pressures while staying true to its ideals and principles. The diversity of the topics addressed by the authors is also an indication of how the specific framework of each country influenced organic farming's development, leading to specific opportunities and challenges. However, there is one common topic running through all papers of this issue: organic farming is no longer a unitary movement with a clear and uncontested identity. What defines the 'quality' and the 'alternativeness' of organic products has been appropriated and redefined by various actors, each emphasising different aspects. These heterogeneous meanings raise the challenge for the organic farming movement to find and maintain an overall coherence.

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