



## The capitalist composition of organic: The potential of markets in fulfilling the promise of organic agriculture

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**Abstract.** Observers of agriculture and the environment have noted the recent remarkable growth of the organic products industry. Is it possible for this growth in the organics market to contribute to progressive environmental and social goals? From the perspective of green consumerism, the organics market is a powerful engine for positive change because it promotes greater environmental awareness and responsibility among producers and consumers alike. Given its environmental benefits and its ability to use and alter capitalist markets, organic agriculture is currently a positive force for environmentalism. Still, there are contradictions between organic ideals and practice – e.g., the reductionism of organic standards, the limitations of private organic certification, and the widespread practice of input-substitution – that emerge through the dynamics of the capitalist market. As the market matures, these contradictions will increasingly undermine the very environmental benefits that are the foundation of organic agriculture. Fundamental change, therefore, is not likely to occur through the market alone. There are ways, however, that the organics market could contribute to a broader movement leading to collective action. For instance, the organics market tends to undermine commodity fetishism in the agrifood system, thereby strengthening civil society. In addition, the market provides space and resources for social movement activity, such as in the struggle over the National Organic Standards.

**Key words:** Commodity fetishism, Ecological soundness, Green consumerism, Input substitution, National Organic Standards, Organic agriculture, Organic agriculture – environmental benefits, Organic agriculture growth, Organic agriculture – scientific justification, Organic agriculture – social aspects, Organic certification, Organic farming, Organic practice, Organic standards – limitations, Organic industry – contradictions, Organic market, Social movements

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The increase in production and consumption of organic food is one of the major market trends of our time. Advocates of organic agriculture claim that it will help preserve the environment, improve people's health, and create better conditions for agricultural workers. From this perspective, the market for organic products has the potential to create broad-based progressive change in the agrifood system. Is it possible for organic agriculture to create these kinds of changes within the political-economic system in which it is embedded? To date, studies of organic agriculture have focused on production practices and consumer preferences,

neither of which help to answer this question. In this paper we ask if the market for organic agriculture products fulfills its proponents' promise of achieving ecological soundness in agriculture.

We have chosen to focus on environmental issues because improving environmental conditions in agricultural production is the most significant and consistent claim made by advocates of organic agriculture. Elsewhere we take up the food safety claims and cultural aspects of organic food, and the ways in which the focus on ecological issues and natural materials in organic agriculture obscures social relations of produc-

tion. We realize that social and environmental relations are inseparable in practice (Allen, 1993); we separate them here for the sake of method.

We begin with a brief review of the theory underlying claims about the potential of achieving environmental goals through market exchange, notably green consumerism, and discuss organic agriculture in this context. We then raise questions about seeming environmental contradictions that have arisen in organic agriculture largely in response to market pressures and dynamics. Finally, we explore possibilities for the organic market to counteract these contradictions and become a catalyst for social and political change.

### 1. Buying ecological soundness through the organics market

The notion that social goods such as environmental preservation can be procured through the market is well established in various approaches of environmental economics (see, for example, Pearce, 1998; Turner, 1993). An approach applied to the domain of the consumer is called green consumerism, which has been an important feature in the culture of environmentalism since the 1980s. The central tenet of green consumerism is that consumers, by becoming more informed and shopping more responsibly, can transform the way in which goods are produced. Proponents of green consumerism argue that capitalist markets provide opportunities for responsible consumers to “vote” with their dollars and thereby work to solve environmental problems. In the foreword to *The Green Consumer*, Ben Cohen of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream company writes,

As Green Consumers, you have the right and responsibility to vote – with your dollars – on how well businesses are doing these things: how successfully they are addressing the issues you believe are most important to your life, and to the life of our planet. As the saying goes, vote early, and vote often. (Cohen, 1990: xii)<sup>1</sup>

Part of the appeal of green consumerism is that a small number of consumers can make an impact. If even 15 percent of consumers start buying recycled paper products, the argument goes, the major producers will stand up and take notice, and they will respond by producing more recycled products (Elkington et al., 1990). This is not to say that they will shift production entirely to recycled products; rather, they will “seriously consider making recycled paper products widely available” (ibid.: 10). The result would be an “efficient allocation” of recycled and

non-recycled paper (Ekins, 1992b: 322). Even beyond that, the shift of resources towards recycled paper would create a new infrastructure and a new marketing system that could lead to a larger investment in recycled paper than seemed indicated by the original green consumer base.

The key institutions for green consumerists are “progressive markets.” These are markets made up of businesses, investors, and consumers that are committed to progressive social or environmental change, and they are a growing segment of the economy (Ekins, 1992a). Green consumers are credited as the driving force of the progressive market. However, no matter how well intentioned, consumers cannot make green choices without good information. Historically, consumers have been given little or no information about the social or environmental impacts of a product’s production and consumption. The green consumerist solution to this problem is to provide the necessary information; sources include governments, independent analysts, and even the producers themselves (Ekins, 1992b). There is a growing demand for this kind of information and an explosion of information sources. One of the most prominent, *The Green Consumer Guide* (Elkington and Hailes, 1988), soared to the top of the non-fiction best-seller list shortly after its release. Another important source of information is labeling schemes. This information combines with the intentions of green consumers and drives the growth of progressive markets.

The market for organic food is a paradigmatic case of green consumerism. The very definition of organic products entails preserving, and even improving, the environmental conditions upon which production depends. The National Organic Standards Board defines organic practices as follows:

Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony. (National Organic Standards Board, 1995)

Consumers support this ecologically sound approach to farming, with the result that organic products have become one of the fastest-growing segments of the food industry.

Almost from the beginning, the organic foods industry understood the importance of providing the consumer with information, particularly in the form of accurate and reliable labels. A key incentive for developing organic standards was the numerous reports in the press about farmers and retailers labeling conventional food as organic; most damaging was a state lab

examination that found that 30 percent of the 55 organically labeled products tested had detectable pesticide residues (Belasco, 1993). The organic label is one of the earliest and the most successful eco-labels; as early as the 1970s California and Oregon passed laws regulating organic labeling. Since that time, the success of the organic label has led independent groups, such as the Food Alliance, to use the organic label as a model for their own eco-labels (Kane, 1999). One of the primary barriers to green consumerism is the absence of “nationally accepted standards or coding systems for determining what products are environmentally sound” (Elkington et al., 1990: 7). The organics industry is notable because it has, to a great extent, overcome this barrier.

## 2. Market success?: Environmental benefits of organic agriculture

Ecological soundness is the key claim, indeed the *raison d'être*, of organic agriculture. By its very definition, organic agriculture is expected to not only reduce the use of polluting and environmentally degrading products, but also restore environmental conditions of production by building soil, for example. In the widely presented, “For You and Your Customers: 10 Reasons to Buy Organic” in *Natural Foods Merchandiser* (1998), consumers are informed that organic agriculture will prevent soil erosion, protect water quality, save energy because it does not rely on energy-intensive synthetic fertilizers or herbicides, and promote biodiversity by eschewing the practice of planting the same crop in the same soil in successive years. Not only the industry, but also environmental nongovernmental organizations promote organic agriculture based on ecological goals. For example, the Natural Resources Defense Council (1996) advocates organic agriculture, in an article titled, “Eating What Comes Naturally,” stating that it reduces topsoil erosion, toxic runoff, and the loss of biodiversity.

The legitimacy of such claims is essential if the green consumerist promise is to come true – if the organic agriculture market is to lead to widespread environmental improvement. Though the science comparing the environmental effects of organic and conventional agriculture is not very well developed, the available evidence suggests that, as currently practiced, organic farming is less destructive to the environment than is conventional agriculture. Numerous studies document that pesticides used in conventional agriculture have caused significant damage to ecosystems, both on and off the farm (see, for example, Conway and Pretty, 1991; Pimentel et al., 1991). Off-farm, they have reduced fish and wildlife populations

and damaged aquatic and terrestrial plants. On-farm, they have reduced populations of beneficial organisms such as natural enemies, soil biota, and pollinators; directly destroyed crops; and caused secondary pest problems. Organic farms, which avoid or eliminate the use of synthetic pesticides, would be expected to avoid these ill effects, and these expectations are confirmed in Conacher and Conacher’s (1998) review of the literature. Other serious ecological problems associated with conventional agriculture are soil depletion and erosion. In studies that compare conventional and organic agriculture, organic farming has been found to reduce erosion and to improve the soil – physically, chemically, and biologically (see, for example, Conacher and Conacher, 1998; Liebig and Doran, 1998).

In its ideal form, organic agriculture strives to work with, rather than against, the prevailing mechanisms of a particular agroecosystem. According to the Organic Trade Association (n.d.-a), “The principal guidelines for organic production are to use materials and practices that enhance the ecological balance of natural systems and that integrate the parts of the farming system into an ecological whole.” This is the type of farming in which many organic growers are engaged. For example, a national study of organic vegetable growers documents that most growers manage pests through noninvasive practices such as crop rotation, selecting pest-resistant varieties, and adjusting planting dates (US Department of Agriculture, 1996). While any agriculture is, by definition, disruptive of the ecosystem in which it is located, organic agriculture is developing the kind of production practices that will be required in an ecologically benign form of agriculture. This fact, combined with the rapid growth in organic food consumption and production, seems to answer the question about the ecological potential of the organics market in the affirmative.

However, if we look at this question with a sense of history, it becomes more complicated, and the answer becomes less certain. The definition of organic is not a fixed entity; nor are prevailing organic practices; nor are the agroecosystems in which they are implemented. Rather, they are the product of historically specific social formations, with particular ecological, economic, and political characteristics; inevitably they will change. Therefore, it is important to look not only at the ecological soundness of *current* organic practice, but also at those aspects of current organic practice that fall short of the organic ideal and may prove to be unsustainable in the long run. These features point to trouble ahead in an industry that is fast becoming more concentrated and more competitive. In California, for instance, in many ways the production and distribution of organic food have been integrated into

the conventional commodity chain, and organic agriculture is beginning to resemble some of conventional agriculture's economic structures (Buck et al., 1997).

### 3. Market failure?: Emerging contradictions of the organics market

Currently, the standards and practices of organic agriculture contain a number of contradictions and inconsistencies, some of which result from the dynamics of the capitalist marketplace. These contradictions may or may not significantly decrease the environmental sustainability of organic agriculture today; however, they may be an indication of trends within the industry that threaten long-term sustainability.

Many of the contradictions arise because of the nature of standards, which inevitably cannot perfectly capture the ideal they are meant to represent. As discussed above, at the core of the organic philosophy is a commitment to holism and ecological sensitivity, and it is clear that many organic farmers share this commitment. However, few organic farmers fully achieve the ideal, and many are far from it. Representatives of a consortium of organic food companies, all of whom are charter members of the National Organic Standards Board, point out that while holistic organic farms do exist in today's world, they have rarely seen one in their work with hundreds of organic farmers in several countries (Kahn et al., 1999).

Part of the problem is that organic standards are particularly hard pressed to capture concepts such as holism and ecological sensitivity. In general, the standards delineate allowed and prohibited substances, which tends to lead to input substitution. The result is that the original holistic paradigm of organic agriculture has been dissected into component parts. Some organic farmers, like conventional farmers, manage natural barriers to production with the application of outside inputs. In this form, organic farming mimics the technological "limiting factor" approaches of conventional agriculture except that it substitutes biological inputs for chemical inputs (Rosset and Altieri, 1997). This input-substitution approach is supported by the existing economic system, where commodifiable solutions – those that can be profitably manufactured and sold – are the ones most likely to be developed, marketed, and used (Bird, 1988). Already, organic farming publications are filled with advertisements for expensive biological inputs such as pesticides, compost, beneficial insects, and soil amendments (Rosset and Altieri, 1997).

In the face of standards that cannot adequately capture the ideal of organic agriculture, and under the pressure of advertising and the dynamics of competi-

tive markets, farmers have an economic incentive to cut corners to increase profits at the risk of ecological soundness. For example, some organic farmers have already gone to multiple cropping instead of including a period of fallow, or mono-cropping to increase production, harvest, and market efficiency (Guthman, 2000). These practices will have negative ecological consequences eventually. As Leff (1995: 24) puts it, "Gradual regenerative processes that allow biotic resources to recuperate and to grow cannot keep pace with accelerated capital reproduction cycles." There are also instances where this kind of corner-cutting crosses the line into fraud. There are reports of growers using methyl bromide to fumigate a piece of land, planting a perennial crop such as apples or grapes on the fumigated land, and then growing the plants using organic methods. By the time the plants start producing, the required three-year organic growing period will have passed and the crops can be sold as certified organic.

In the long run, capitalist dynamics will tend to bring about changes in the standards themselves. This could happen in a positive direction, i.e., in the direction of stricter standards and stronger enforcement. Strict standards may be a barrier to entry for large farms and untrained or uncommitted farmers. Therefore, committed, well-established organic farmers might have an incentive to push for stricter standards in order to protect their market share. There is evidence of this happening in the struggle over National Organic Standards, where many organic farmers protested the USDA's loosening of the standards. However, change is at least as likely to go the other way. Particularly if firms who are not committed to the organic philosophy and practice gain a foothold in the market and its regulating bodies, there will be pressure to weaken the standards – to formulate standards more conducive to large numbers of firms entering the marketplace. According to the *New York Times*, when the USDA released its second draft of the National Organic Standards, some advocates of organic farming thought the standards were too strict, "possibly discouraging rather than encouraging [farmers] to grow organic crops" (Burros, 2000). The executive director of the Organic Trade Association remarked, "The document is certainly closer to meeting industry expectations than the first one, but the pendulum may have swung too far" (ibid.).

Already, considerations of economic efficiency are represented in organic standards. For example, if a producer cannot find untreated seeds for a particular crop, they are allowed to use seeds treated with synthetic fungicides. In cases where organic seeds or plants are not available (e.g., strawberries, potatoes, and garlic), non-organic plants and seeds are allowed. In addi-

tion, when farmers are threatened with crop failure, they can appeal to the certifying agency for permission to apply “botanical or other non-persistent pesticides” (Organic Trade Association, n.d.-b). These contradictions within organic standards are perhaps unavoidable and perhaps minor; however, over time these contradictions could be exploited to weaken standards and to undermine arguments about the benefits of organic methods.

To date, most of the certification of organic food has been done by private certifying agencies, and these companies have also been vulnerable to economic pressures. According to the executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, the push toward increasing market shares has resulted in ongoing pressure in the certification community to relax standards to maintain members, and a reluctance to publicly implement enforcement measures (Scowcroft, 1999). In fact, Scowcroft points out, the success of self-certification in the organics industry has been limited, and the exposure of violators has been the result of actions taken by government attorneys, not by the certification groups of which the violators were members.

As the federal government enters the certification process, the same dynamics are at work. In 1990, Congress established the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), comprising members of the organic agriculture industry, with a mandate to make recommendations to the USDA for a set of National Organic Standards. In 1997, when drawing up these standards, the USDA ignored many of the recommendations of the NOSB and submitted standards that directly contradicted current organic practice – permitting, for example, the use of sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetically modified organisms (US Department of Agriculture, 1997). The reasons for the USDA action have not been adequately explored; nonetheless, these actions are consistent with an attempt to weaken the standards in order to break down barriers to entry for large agribusiness firms and to increase opportunities for profits.

Many farmers will resist trends toward ecologically questionable practices, and some certifying organizations are currently working to refocus organic farming on ecological processes such as nutrient cycling rather than input substitution. Ultimately, however, flat or falling profits that result from competition will tend to force farmers, input-suppliers, processors, and retailers to speed up production, cut costs, and increase the rate of product sales. Deeply committed organic farmers will go to great lengths to avoid such practices, but it is unlikely that the same approach will be taken by the many growers entering the business mainly to capture the price premium on organic produce. As

the organic market expands, large-scale agribusiness is entering the industry, either through converting small amounts of their vast acreages to organic production or through contracts with or outright purchase of successful organic enterprises. In the capitalist marketplace, such growers can out-compete those who avoid the input-substitution model. Currently, price premiums are a form of technological rent paid to early innovative organic farmers, but market expansion and competition will surely lower these rents. What will happen to committed organic farmers when price premiums decline or disappear?

The dynamics of the marketplace will tend to steer organic agriculture in the direction of farming systems that are technologically expedient and economically efficient in order to maximize productivity and profit, a path that is anathema to the original organic ideal.

#### **4. Market correction?: The organics market and political and social change**

What is required to overcome these contradictions are deeper changes in social, scientific, political, and economic relations. Does the market for organic products have the potential to instigate these changes? We see two areas in which it might. First, there is the ability of the organic products market to defetishize the commodity form of food. Second, there is the ability of the organic products market to serve as a point of connectivity and organizing around larger issues.

##### *4.1. The organic label and commodity fetishism*

Perhaps the greatest potential of the organics market lies less in some objective “truth” of ecological sustainability, and more in its potential to demystify the commodity form of food. To examine this proposition, we explore Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism (i.e., concealing social relations embedded in the commodity) and apply it more broadly to include the concealing of another form of relationship embedded in the commodity, namely, the way producers appropriate and transform nature.

The fetishism of commodities is a condition within capitalism in which the social relationships through which commodities are produced are obscured in the commodity as it appears in the market. The social relations are concealed because of the way commodities are exchanged for money:

The exchange of commodities for money is real enough, yet it conceals our social relationships with others behind a mere thing – the money form itself. The act of exchange tells us nothing about the conditions of labour of the producers, for example,

and keeps us in a state of ignorance concerning our social relations as these are mediated by the market system. We respond solely to the prices of quantities of use values. (Harvey, 1982: 17)

Because the social relationships are invisible, consumers see value as something that inheres in the material commodities themselves, rather than something that is created by particular social relations. Similarly, consumers see profits as a natural outgrowth of capital, rather than a result of a particular social relationship, namely exploitation (Lukács, 1971). Thus, the consumer's perception constitutes a fetishization, attributing to objects a magical property (value) that is not a property of the material object itself, but of the social relations through which it was produced. By obscuring the relationship between commodities and social relations, fetishization reifies those social relations. The social relations appear to be a result of the value of commodities and immutable laws of economics, rather than the converse, that the values of commodities and the economic laws are a result of social relationships and processes – which are changeable. The political significance of this fetishization is that it hides the source of profits and, therefore, it deadens social action and resistance.

In this paper, in order to highlight defetishization in the organics market, we expand the notion of commodity fetishism to include human relations with nature; in so doing, we combine social relations and nature-society relations into one category. Part of the justification for this is that our relations with nature are also a form of social relations. This is true not only if one believes that our relations with other species are social, but also because the environment is often a medium through which people exert power over one another. The other part of our justification is that the concealing of nature-society relations is widespread in conventional agriculture and the revealing of these relations is central to organic agriculture. We would like our concepts to mirror this reality. At the same time, we do not wish to erase the distinction between nature-society relations and social relations because that distinction is often silently adopted within green consumerism and organic agriculture. We wish to keep this distinction as an analytic tool to point out the disturbing invisibility of important social issues, such as labor relations and land tenure, within both conventional and organic agriculture today (see, for example, Allen, 1994; Allen and Sachs, 1993).

Bringing nature-society relations into the picture, then, we can say that the anonymous market alienates or separates us from “true understanding of our relations with others, and with nature” (Pepper, 1996: 89). When consumers consider a strawberry in the market,

for example, they tend to regard its value as a function of its material characteristics, not as a function of processes that include backbreaking labor, soil erosion, and public research investments. Because it conceals and reifies these underlying processes, commodity fetishism is at the core of a social process that subverts fundamental change, both in the social world and in the natural-social world.

It would be ironic to suggest that commodity fetishism has a market solution. Nonetheless, there are capitalist forces in green markets that tend to reduce this mystification, since it can be a barrier to profits for green producers. The more consumers know about production processes, the more likely they are to buy green products. Therefore, it is in the interest of green capitalists to combat that form of alienation through advertising, lobbying, and marketing. Green producers have an interest in describing their own production practices in order to compare them to the production practices of their conventional competitors. One critic of green consumerism admits that it has been successful on this point:

For all their shortcomings, green consumer movements have done much to counter this objectification of relations of production in capitalism, encouraging us to look beneath the superficial appearance of commodities as mere depersonalized things. (Pepper, 1996: 90)

By shedding light on production methods, green businesses can reduce or eliminate the alienation between consumption and production that conceals natural-social relations in the production process, thereby weakening commodity fetishism.

Still, this incentive for defetishization in progressive markets, while real, is only partial. Defetishization is likely to occur only insofar as it resonates with the economic concerns of the businesses involved. Green producers do not have an incentive to discuss everything about their production methods, but only to discuss those aspects of their production methods that distinguish them favorably from conventional producers. Further, the true economic incentive is not actually to produce commodities in a more progressive fashion but, rather, to *appear* to do so. Hence, there may be an incentive to obscure the truth. We believe that it is important, from a social-movement perspective, to recognize both the reality of defetishization as well as its limits.

#### 4.2. *De-fetishization in the organics industry*

The organics industry has engaged in defetishization in order to distinguish itself from conventional agriculture. Organics marketers explicitly direct the attention

of consumers away from decontextualized products and towards the processes that bring those commodities into being. In a web page called “Frequently Asked Questions,” the primary trade association for the organic products industry in the US, the Organic Trade Association (OTA) puts the question of production processes front and center. The first question on the page is, “What are organic products?” and the answer begins, “Organic refers not to the food itself, but to *how* it is produced” (Organic Trade Association, n.d.-b). Similarly, in the OTA’s “top 5 reasons to buy organic,” the first reason is not a claim about health or environmental benefits but rather a claim about production processes:

Organic products meet stringent standards. Organic certification is the public’s assurance that products have been grown and handled according to strict procedures without persistent toxic chemicals. (Coleman, 1999: 31)

Several of the OTA’s “frequently asked questions” are questions about the commodities themselves, but in answering these questions, the OTA steers the reader’s attention away from the product and towards the process (Organic Trade Association, n.d.-b). Thus, the organics industry is taking action to make production processes more transparent, actively undermining the fetishism of agricultural commodities. This increased transparency is a positive development that could be used as a fulcrum from which to lift the public consciousness of the food system to a more critical level.

#### 4.3. *Making science accountable*

This practice of making production processes more transparent gives the organic-products market a certain radical potential. In this regard, it is like many other green markets that promote the transparency of production processes. But the organics industry takes this issue of transparency a step further, and in this sense it is a special case of green consumerism. In agriculture the nature-human relations inherent in the production process are particularly difficult to pin down; our knowledge of them is mediated by scientific experts.<sup>2</sup> The environmental consequences of synthetic fertilizers, for example, are not readily apparent; in order to see them, we need the lenses provided by scientists. Therefore, the argument that organic food is better than non-organic food implicitly and explicitly entails a critique of the scientific institutions that tell us otherwise. Because of this situation, the defetishization of commodities found in the organics industry often reaches beyond the relations of production of organic food and into the relations of production of regulatory science – those scientific and governmental institutions

that assure consumers that conventionally grown food is safe for people and the environment.

From its inception, organic agriculture has been rooted in a critique of political and scientific institutions. In his germinal work on organic agriculture, *The Soil and Health*, published in 1947, Sir Albert Howard argued that conventional agricultural science was not adequate to its task, leading to science that was not sensitive to ecological consequences (Howard, 1972 [1947]).<sup>3</sup>

Among the proponents of organic agriculture that continue a critique of scientific and government institutions is John Wargo, the author of *Our Children’s Toxic Legacy: How Science and Law Fail to Protect Us from Pesticides* (1998). After a detailed analysis of the science and policy of pesticides, Wargo recommends that parents feed their children organic foods, arguing that “government has neither the capacity to predict exposures with accuracy nor to protect children from significant risks” (Wargo, 1998: 306). A similar argument is made by Andrew Weil, an MD, a best-selling author of many books on natural health, and another proponent of organic foods. He says, “I cannot emphasize too strongly that residues of toxic chemicals in foods we eat are major health hazards, affecting us in ways that current medical science and governmental policy often fail to recognize” (Weil, 1995: 164). The popularity of books such as these reflects the engagement of the general public in the critique of science and government.

A similar critique can be found coming from the organics industry. While the industry does not seem as willing as some independent authors to directly challenge the government and regulatory science, rumblings of such a critique run throughout much of the industry literature. For example, mistrust of regulatory agencies is sown by the second of the OTA’s “Top 5 reasons to buy organic,” which says, “Organic production reduces health risks. Many EPA-approved pesticides were registered long before extensive research linked these chemicals to cancer and other diseases” (Coleman, 1999: 31). This critical voice became loudest during the struggle between the organics industry and the USDA over the National Organic Standards. Soon after the proposed organic rules appeared in the *Federal Register* in December of 1997, the industry magazine *Delicious!* ran an article that was critical of the way the federal government ignored the recommendations of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) and weakened the Rules, which could have the effect of undermining the organics industry (Lipson, 1998). The USDA is portrayed as unfriendly to the goals and ideas of organic; this portrayal would tend to further subvert public trust in the USDA as a scientific regulatory organization.

Clearly, organics businesses are acting to make certain aspects of their production systems more transparent to the consumer. However, this transparency is limited in a number of ways. First, organic producers have an incentive to openly describe their production processes only insofar as they are different from conventional processes. As a result, the social relations inherent in the production process – where organic practices are not necessarily any more progressive than conventional practices – remain hidden. Because organic standards focus primarily on allowable inputs, they tend to suggest that the value of organic products is a function of the inputs themselves instead of the whole labor process that went into producing the commodity. The organic label tends to reduce this natural-social complexity down to a simple matter of natural inputs. Second, in some cases there is the appearance of transparency more than the reality of transparency. All the examples of corner-cutting described above in section three contribute to this obscuring of the glass of transparency. Third, claims about the value of organic commodities are often vague, saying little or nothing about the scientific reasoning or evidence behind them.

Despite these limitations, defetishization in the organics industry is real, and it is the core of a market-mediated process that could – perhaps with some prodding – become a catalyst for real social change. This process is rooted in the notion that organic production methods are better for health and the environment than conventional methods. This claim has been taken up by the marketing arm of the organics industry, which has supported the claim by making the production processes in agriculture more transparent to the public. Finally, the organics industry has taken some steps – though relatively cautious ones – to turn a critical spotlight on the scientific and regulatory institutions that have supported conventional agriculture in the past and continue to do so in the present. This transparency – reaching into the farm, the scientific laboratories, and government agencies – could contribute to the cause of social movements working for changes in the way we relate to each other and the way we appropriate and transform nature.

## 5. The market as a catalyst for larger change

The organics market could also be a catalyst for positive political and social change in another way – through its powers of accumulation and organization. The potential effectiveness of this catalyst will grow along with the market for organic products. First, as the market draws increasing numbers of people who produce and consume organic products, it increases the numbers of potential participants in a social movement

centered around organic food. Second, as the organics market grows, it provides more spaces in which people interested in organic agriculture can meet and organize. Third, the growing organics businesses can be a source of funds for activities such as research, conferences, and political action. This is not to say that the organics market has radical potential in its own right; rather, there are certain characteristics of the organics market that provide opportunities for social movement activity.

### 5.1. *Customers for change*

Over the past few decades, the organics industry has grown rapidly.<sup>4</sup> It has been growing by more than 20 percent a year since 1990, and the proportion of the US food supply grown with organic methods is expected to increase from one to ten percent by 2000 (McCann, 1998). According to the Organic Trade Association, in 1980, organic farming generated \$178 million in national sales; the growth from 1990 to 1997 was from \$1 to \$4 billion (The Hartman Group, 1999). While there are overall decreases in farmed acreage and the number of farms in the US, the opposite is true in organic agriculture (Klonsky and Tourte, 1998). There were 76 percent more organic farms in 1995 than in 1991, the number of acres farmed organically nearly doubled over this same 4-year period (Anton Dunn, 1997). No longer only available at natural foods stores, organic foods are increasingly available at supermarkets, convenience stores, and high-end restaurants. This growth in the industry, by virtue of the sheer number of people involved, is bound to lead to growth in the organics movement as the number of people who understand organic agriculture and care about it also grow. Some organic consumers and producers will become convinced that the best way to effect significant change is through collective action, and they will act accordingly.

Indeed, the political activities of the organics industry have overlapped substantially with the activities of NGOs, politicians, and individuals committed to environmental and social change. These groups constitute a movement that has recently grown in size and influence. Growth in the organics industry has been paralleled by a growth in the organizations dedicated to organic agriculture. For example, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), the worldwide umbrella organization of the organic agriculture movement, has grown markedly. Started in 1972 by five organizations from France, South Africa, the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden, IFOAM now has 600 member organizations and institutions in 100 countries. The California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), started in 1973 by

a group of 50 farmers to define uniform standards for organic food and establish a certification program for farmers' practices, now has 750 growers, 110 processors, and 372 supporting members (Brayman, 1999). The organizing around the federal organic rule has resulted in the creation of two new nongovernmental organizations, the Organic Consumers Association and the Organic Farmers Association Council, as well as invigorating and increasing ties among existing organizations. Social movement development can happen intensively or extensively, i.e., the same number of people becoming more deeply committed or greater numbers of people becoming somewhat committed. The growth in organics provides opportunities for both.

### 5.2. *Spaces for organizing*

This development will be facilitated by the physical and social spaces created by the organics industry. Organic food stores, for instance, provide spaces where people committed to organic agriculture can meet for political work. A notable case of a political space created by the industry is the organized response to the proposed National Organic Standards in 1998. After the proposed standards were published in the *Federal Register*, the USDA received a record number of responses from the public, and they took the proposal back for extensive revisions.

Natural food stores and other organizations in the organics market played a large part in organizing this response. Stores such as Whole Foods Market displayed posters and distributed flyers describing the "big three" flaws in the proposed standards and urging customers to write to the USDA. Of the 275,603 public comments, 173,718 – a full 63 percent – were form letters and postcards distributed to individuals by some organization (US Department of Agriculture, n.d.). Many form letters were distributed by organic food businesses. The Community of Natural Food Markets marshaled 14,592 letters, the Organic Farmers Marketing Association, 11,667, and many other organics businesses produced smaller numbers. Clearly, organics businesses can be effective organizers of political action.

Even if the businesses are not directly involved, the bulletin boards and doorways of organics supermarkets can be productive locations for organizing.

### 5.3. *Funding for change*

Organics businesses can also be a source of funds for research and conferences on organic products. A 1999 conference entitled "Organic: Growing into the 21st Century," organized by the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF), was funded by grants

from prominent members of the organic and natural foods industry.<sup>5</sup> As might be expected, a significant portion of the conference was dedicated to business concerns. However, there were also presentations and discussions on topics such as the social performance of the organic products industry, the pros and cons of globalization of the organics industry, and linking the organic label to other labels oriented towards social justice and human rights. Private capital also provides funding for research on organic agriculture. For example, 21 percent of OFRF's income came from the private sector in 1999 (Organic Farming Research Foundation, n.d.).

We do not want to overstate this point or to suggest that the economic relations underlying this conference and this research have no bearing on their content. Nonetheless, conferences like these do bring together people who are committed to organic agriculture, and research conducted by these kinds of groups can lend critical support to social movements.

## 6. The promise and limits of markets

We return to our question, can organic agriculture create environmental sustainability within the market system?

There is evidence that the existing organic agriculture market has made some significant advances toward preserving the ecological conditions of production. Organic agriculture has "softened" the technologies for appropriating nature, which may allow agroecosystems to become self-sustaining. Organic agriculture as a symbol and practice will no doubt continue to enjoy market success. And, although the market for organic products is small, it is made up largely of people with power and money and therefore of people in a position to effect change.

Commodity defetishization could lead to a more powerful civil society, a society that more readily challenges the state. The debate over the organic standards generated more public response than any other rule ever proposed by the USDA (Klonsky and Tourte, 1998). In the comment period between December 1997 and April 1998, the USDA received 275,603 comments on the proposed rule (US Department of Agriculture, n.d.). This challenge, once unleashed, could begin to include social as well as environmental and social issues. Interestingly, the largest group of form letters, comprising 35,989 letters, came not from the organics industry but from another progressive business, Working Assets. For this business, environmental issues are only a part of its portfolio; most of its causes are social and economic justice. Perhaps this provides an opening for reciprocal embracing of Work-

ing Assets' social justice issues by those in the organic agriculture movement.

Change is taking place at the political level already. The US Department of Agriculture has moved away from its refusal to recognize organic food, and toward developing a set of federal rules for labeling organic food. That such legislation could even be considered is a remarkable change over the past 15 years. In addition, the federal Agricultural Research, Extension and Education Reauthorization Act of 1997 contains a new Organic Agricultural Research and Extension Initiative, authorizing an organic agriculture research program for the first time in history. It seems likely that these changes in Congress and the USDA are partly a result of the growing market share held by the organics industry. It may be because of the growing cadre of organic consumers and producers that the government recently is paying more attention to the social movement that has been banging on its door. The public response to the proposed National Organic Standards, and the USDA's reaction, is a clear case of the state responding to public/consumer pressure.

Given these advances, it is tempting to forecast that these trends will continue, bringing about a fundamental change in the way the agrifood system operates. Yet despite the strength of the organics market, in the long run, we see significant limitations in the potential of the organic products market to change the world single-handedly, one consumer at a time. Indeed, green consumers are reassured that they need not drastically change their lifestyles. "By choosing carefully, you can have a positive impact on the environment without significantly compromising your way of life. That's what being a Green Consumer is all about" (Elkington et al., 1990: 5). Because green consumerism is relatively easy, the argument goes, it is conceivable that a critical mass of people could start shopping differently and make a difference. Of course, the other side is an assurance that you don't really need to do anything besides alter your buying patterns in order to change the world, hardly fuel to ignite a transformative social movement. Ultimately, the individual action that is the hallmark of the market cannot resolve collective problems. This requires collective action in the form of social movements, not the "invisible hand" of the market.

There is a clear tension between the hope of green consumerism and the power of market dynamics. Along with the progress in organic farming practices, the growing market for organic food, and political changes, there are questions about the "real" as opposed to symbolic power of green consumerism. While organic farming practices "may suggest a more environmentally benign direction, they leave in place the key forces that are driving the agricultural crisis"

(Rosset and Altieri, 1997: 289). And, while a federal research bill authorized an organic farming research program, the legislation failed to guarantee funding. Such research as does exist closely resembles that of conventional agriculture in its nearly exclusive focus on farming practices rather than the constellation of social and natural phenomena that comprise the totality of the agrifood system.

The increased transparency of production processes resulting from commodity defetishization inherent in the marketing of organic agricultural products is real but limited. Unless this transparency is extended to include social relations, it will not shed light on the complex natural-social relations that are the root of the problems in our agrifood system, and its potential to effect fundamental change will be circumscribed.

So, is organic agriculture a social space for improving ecological soundness in agriculture within the framework of capitalism, that is, without fundamental social and economic change? Our answer is that in the short run, the market for organic agriculture probably can enhance ecological soundness in agriculture. For this to work in the long term, however, requires changes in political, social, and economic structures and relationships. Competitive pressures are already beginning to lead some producers away from strict adherence to the goal of ecological soundness. Ultimately, the dynamics of the capitalist market will consume improvements in ecological sustainability. The question then becomes, does the market for organic agriculture have the potential to instigate these larger changes, possibly fueling a vital social movement around organic food and agriculture? This is what will be required. Organic labeling is simply not enough to create an agrifood system that provides real value. After all, as Marx (1967: 79) pointed out long ago, "Value does not stalk about with a label describing what it is."

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### Notes

1. Of course, Cohen stands to gain if consumers vote often for his ice cream. Consumers stand to gain, too, but for them, the currency will be different – not dollars but pounds.
2. For a full discussion of the role of science as an intermediary in environmental problems, see Beck (1992 [1986]: 52ff.)
3. Science, Howard argued, had ignored most of the properties of soil and had focused on only three elements: nitrogen,

phosphorus, and potassium. Furthermore, it had taken agriculture, “a vast biological complex,” and fragmented it into an array of different components, each to be studied separately. This subdivision of agriculture was reflected in the subdivision of research institutions into different disciplines.

4. Despite a general sense that the production and consumption of organic food is increasing, we should note that the data and studies on organic prices, sales, and consumers are spotty, inconclusive, and sometimes even contradictory. According to Karen Raterman (1999) of New Hope Natural Media, the infrastructure for collecting data on organic food has not yet been developed. The industry is hopeful that after the passage of the national organic standards, the category of “organic” will be standardized, and the data will be collected.
5. Sponsors listed in the conference brochure included: Bacharis Capital Inc. (a venture capital firm that specializes in socially responsible companies); New Hope Natural Media (publisher of *Organic Times* and *Delicious!* magazine); Newman’s Own Organics; Earthbound Farm; Natural Business Communications (publisher of a business and financial journal for the natural products industry); Nature’s Equity (an investment bank to the natural products industry); the Organic Trade Association; Sheppard, Mullin, Hampton & Richter (lead counsel of the Organic Trade Association); Wholesome Sweeteners; and Whole Foods Market.

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