



## Visions of the middle landscape: Organic farming and the politics of nature

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**Abstract.** The proposed federal regulation of organic agriculture in the United States raises questions both about the nature and character of organic farming, as well as its relation to the agro-food system at large. The regulatory process has engendered a public debate about conventional and alternative approaches to agricultural production, which in turn raises issues of environmental politics and society-nature relations. An analysis of transcripts from public hearings, organic farming movement literature, and interviews with organic practitioners and advocates reveals the broader ecological, social, and political ramifications. In examining the proposed federal rule and its critical opposition, we encounter two different worldviews; two conflicting visions of agriculture, rural life, and nature itself. Whether this is a fundamental impasse, or a controversy that can be fruitfully resolved, remains an open question. But organic farming has arrived at a critical juncture, both fraught with peril, and full of opportunity. The enormous public response to this issue indicates the renewed potential on the part of civil society to participate in grassroots environmental social movements in support of alternative agriculture.

**Key words:** Environmental politics, Federal regulation, Nature-society relations, Organic farming and food

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### Introduction: Re-envisioning the middle landscape

The attitude of the state towards organic farming has been to disregard, ignore, or repress the ideological content of the movement – its vision of the relations humans should develop with both nature and society – attempting to wrench the production practices free from this and slot them into a different context in which they do not in fact fit at all easily . . .

(Tovey, 1997: 33)

In December of 1997, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the National Organic Program Proposed Rule (NOPPR), which was the supposed culmination of a process initiated by the passage of the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) of 1990. The ensuing criticism was both vociferous and prolific. By April of 1998, the USDA had received nearly 300,000 comments on the proposed rule, more than any other legislation in the history of the country. The sheer volume of the commentary, combined with its overwhelmingly negative evaluation of the content of the rule, has apparently caused the USDA to retreat and reevaluate its position. At this writing, the rule is under revision, and is due to be re-released for another comment period in the very near future.

The ongoing debate over the proposed federal regulation of organic farming in the United States raises

fundamental questions, not only about organic farming, but about its relation to conventional agriculture and the agro-food system as a whole. Chief among these is the nature of organic farming itself, as an evolving set of ecological production and land management practices, as an environmental social movement, and now, as a so-called industry. What remains of the original spirit and character of the organic farming movement, and how is this changing with increasing market success?<sup>1</sup> Given the highly controversial politics surrounding the government's proposed rule, how do we situate organic farming in relation to conventional agriculture or, more generally, within the spectrum of agricultural praxes now extant in the contemporary world? Organic farming is often considered to be synonymous with "alternative," "regenerative," or "sustainable" agriculture. How does the debate over national standards inform theories of sustainable agriculture? What does the debate say, how does it contribute to our understanding, of the political, social, as well as ecological, dimensions of sustainability? And what is the significance of organic agriculture (or "good farming" as some organic partisans put it) in the context of the environmental/ecological imaginary of contemporary culture?

Such questions in turn raise broader philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic considerations. Agriculture remains foundational to modern civilization, and rep-

resents the arena where human beings encounter and most intimately interact with nature, in order to produce the necessities of everyday existence (Worster, 1990). Thus the question of good farming necessarily requires reflection upon the (appropriate) human relation to nature. Society-nature relations are nowhere more manifest than in the production and consumption of food. Yet food in the advanced industrial societies has become so extremely fetishized, that the average citizen has lost all sense of where it comes from or how it came to be (Clancy, 1997a). In fact, such questions are rarely asked. Food as commodity seems to have no source. The resources, both human and natural, required to produce it remain veiled, invisible to the average "consumer." In the affluent societies, food is taken for granted, and farming is an unknown, a form of lost knowledge, a gap in the collective memory signifying dissociation and alienation from nature, from the land (Berry, 1990).

Organic farming has existed as a set of alternative food production and land management strategies and practices since before World War II.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, its most prominent proponent was J. I. Rodale and the Rodale Press, publishers of both *Organic Gardening* and *Prevention* magazines, both of which enjoyed a very wide circulation in the post-war years. Rodale was influenced by the writings of Sir Albert Howard and of Lady Eve Balfour, respectively, two of the most influential advocates of organic practice and philosophy in England.<sup>3</sup> Balfour, Howard, and Rodale emphasized the close correlation between the health of the soil, quality of food, and human health and well-being. They were early critics of the industrialization of agriculture and what they perceived as its negative environmental and public health effects.

Organic farming emerged as a rather more radical and visible social movement in the late sixties and early seventies in reaction, and as a form of resistance, to the anomie of the times. As a response to urbanization, hyper-industrialization, and the banality of consumerism, what was then known as the back-to-the-land movement was a romantic attempt to seek some rapprochement with nature; a simpler life away from the perceived corruption of the city (Belasco, 1993). For many urban and suburban intellectuals, the realities of rural living proved too rigorous. But for those who persisted, romanticism turned to skillful and innovative pragmatism, and the idea of a rural renaissance began to take root. Less than 30 years later, what was once disparaged as a marginal anomaly has become a multi-billion dollar market. In the process, the movement has helped to change the way we think about food and farming, or at least has brought food and farming back into public awareness.

The organic farming movement can be seen as a radical gesture of reconciliation with nature, an embodied attempt to change the way we actually live in the (social/natural) world of the middle landscape. The "middle landscape," a term from Leo Marx's (1964) *The Machine in the Garden*, denotes that space, which is at once real and imaginary, between the city and the wilderness, wherein the agrarian and/or pastoral ideal resides, and where people live and work with nature. Despite the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 – Rachel Carson's trenchant indictment of industrial agriculture, its indiscriminate and excessive use of chemical inputs, and their negative ecological ramifications – and its status as a seminal text for environmentalism (Garb, 1996), this middle landscape has been largely ignored by the mainstream environmental movement, and, at least until very recently, remained a blind spot in the modern American mind (Buttel, 1997; Thompson, 1995; Cronon, 1996).

The controversy over the proposed rule represents an argument between different ideological positions and concomitant knowledge systems, different visions of what agriculture is and can be, and of what the middle landscape should look like. For at least fifty years, rural space has been dominated, and transformed by, the productionist paradigm of industrial agriculture (Thompson, 1997). In this context, organic farming can be thought of as a kind of ongoing "ecological resistance movement" (Taylor, 1995), both challenging the hegemony of the agro-industrial paradigm, and proposing and exploring alternative society-nature relations.

The present essay seeks to explore such themes. Beginning with the problematic of the proposed federal regulation of organics, which opens a window on the organic community in confrontation with the conventional agro-food establishment, I offer a brief interpretive narrative of the regulatory process, analyzing selected aspects of both the rule and its public commentary. The first section is meant to offer a West Coast perspective. It is based primarily upon the transcriptions from two USDA hearings held early in 1998, in Seattle, Washington, and Ontario, California, as well as a California Department of Agriculture hearing in Salinas, California. Additional sources include California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) membership meetings, CCOF and Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) literature, commentaries drawn from several web sites, and a number of informal interviews with organic farmers, retailers, and movement/industry advocates and observers in California. The next section moves to a more theoretical discussion of the organic farming movement itself. To conclude, I reflect on the implications and prospects for the middle landscape at the millennium.

### The NOPPR and its discontents

The prospect of the United States Department of Agriculture overseeing and regulating organic farming in America would be problematic, even under the very best of circumstances. The USDA, it will be remembered, has helped to foster the rise of the agro-industrial complex and the subsequent transformation of the rural ("middle") landscape (Thompson, 1995: 23–25). At the turn of the century, approximately 45% of the population were farming. Today less than 2% are involved in agriculture (USDA, 1998). The displacement of the rural population – the emptying of the countryside – is the direct historical result of USDA policy (Merrigan, 1997). The USDA has always been considered anathema by organic farmers. Despite the USDA's *Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming* (1980), which was remarkably favorable, it has remained largely indifferent to, if not ignorant of, both the merits and the research needs of organic farming systems (Lipson, 1997). The historical relationship has thus been characterized by mutual antipathy. If organic farming and industrial agriculture represent two antipodal sets of values, the USDA has been synonymous with the latter, and is considered by many to be in a compromised position with regard to the regulation of organic food and farming at the national level. This view of the USDA as a "captured" agency (Merrigan, 1997: 167), overwhelmingly influenced by and beholden to agribusiness interests, is further reinforced by the testimony discussed below. Given the content of the proposed rule, many commentators are actively proposing the rejection of USDA participation, and advocating a return to the grassroots processes of regulation that have worked so well for more than twenty years.<sup>4</sup>

Misgivings aside, at a certain moment in the mid-1980s, for reasons that remain highly controversial and not fully understood, the idea of instituting federal regulations for organic agriculture took hold, gaining influential advocates within the movement itself, and the legislative and political process began to go forward. The rationale for this initiative was twofold. First, with the burgeoning growth of the market for organic foods, and the concomitant proliferation of organic production, processing, distribution, and retailing operations, along with the establishment of numerous private certifying agencies and various state laws, it was argued that a national standard needed to be established in order to alleviate consumer confusion about labeling. Related to the increasingly lucrative market for organic products, some movement activists feared that opportunistic cheating (knowingly calling something "organically grown"

when it was not) was becoming more widespread. Second, and this is the more insidious underside of the whole matter, there were rumors that the USDA, along with the FDA, was considering banning the term "organic" altogether, apparently because the rising popularity of organic foods was calling into question the products and practices of conventional agribusiness (Bowen, 1998). In this climate of suspicion, some leading members of the organic movement began lobbying members of congress, which ultimately led to the introduction by Senator Patrick Leahy of the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) into the 1990 Farm Bill (Lipson, 1998).

Although there was, and still remains, a great deal of skepticism about the wisdom of such an undertaking, it appears that at least certain self-selected members of the movement made a good faith effort to participate in the regulatory process (Scowcroft interview, February 1998; Bowen, 1998). The OFPA mandated the establishment of an advisory group, the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB),<sup>5</sup> which would be responsible for formulating the national standards and making recommendations to the USDA. The NOSB began by holding a series of meetings around the country, in order to solicit input from its constituency. By most accounts (cf. Youngberg et al., 1998), the work of the NOSB, despite problems with funding, was painstaking and thorough, and their recommendations seemed to reflect a relatively high level of consensus in the organic community.<sup>6</sup> The NOSB recommendations were submitted to the USDA from 1994 to 1996. What was released by the government as the National Organic Program Proposed Rule (NOPPR) in December 1997, was practically unrecognizable (CCOF, 1996: 8). A side by side comparison of the two versions shows very little resemblance.

The language of the rule, while appearing to be transparently democratic in its solicitation of commentary, reads like a public repudiation of the organic tradition. It dismisses, questions, and overturns NOSB recommendations at almost every turn, even though the law (OFPA) gives the NOSB sole authority in determining the rule's contents. The text seems almost openly condescending. It has been interpreted by organic activists as an apparent attempt to subvert the organic farming movement by calling into question its most basic premises. Whether this is cynically malicious, intentionally strategic, or the result of simple misunderstanding remains an open question. But the controversy appears to be a collision between two mutually incomprehensible discourses, thoroughly and irretrievably at odds with each other.

*The public commentary*

As mentioned above, the proposed rule elicited nearly 300,000 public comments. The vast majority of these were sent to the USDA National Organic Program web site via email, and represent an organized consumer response facilitated largely by natural foods retailers across the country. The email barrage included, as well, statements from private certifying agencies, organic farmers organizations, trade groups, environmentalists, and other public interest advocates. In addition, the USDA held a series of public hearings around the country at which several hundred verbal statements were submitted and transcribed. A preliminary reading of the statements submitted into the public record indicates a well-informed, articulate, and impassioned constituency, unanimously adamant in their rejection of the proposed rule.

Eighty-nine individuals gave testimony at the Seattle Hearing on 26 February 1998. The audience contained perhaps three times as many observers, including a group of protesters with signs decrying the proposed rule, gathered at the back of the room. Of the eighty-nine speakers, one third, 31 of them, were organic farmers, 11 were retailers or wholesale distributors of organic products, 13 were professionals (experts and/or advocates), and 25 were lay persons, ordinary citizens/consumers. At the Ontario hearing on 16 March 1998, thirty-six people spoke, including 12 organic farmers, 18 professionals, 5 citizen/consumers, and 1 salmon fisherman. The testimony of lay persons and professionals, farmers and distributors, is remarkably unified, both on general principles and specific details.

Testimony at the USDA hearings is of two kinds, albeit often mixed together, even within individual statements. One category addresses specific sections of the rule, and the technical details and terminologies associated with them. The second category pertains to more general premises and principles of organic farming, including philosophical and political issues, and the role of science. Several specific sections and subsections are repeatedly identified as problematic. These have been mentioned and rehearsed throughout various commentaries on the rule, including organic movement web sites and newsletters, email and form letter comments, and formal institutional critiques. What follows is a synoptic treatment of these specific objections and the more general principles to which they are related, with illustrative quotations from the hearing transcripts.

The opposition begins with the so-called "big three," i.e., the proposed inclusion of genetically engineered organisms, sewage sludge, and food irradiation under the rubric of organics. The inclusion of

these three categories is a sobering indication of a bureaucratic process extraordinarily out of touch with a constituency it is ostensibly meant to serve. It incited widespread outrage, helping to catalyze the large public response. The NOSB had already considered and specifically rejected genetically engineered organisms (GEOs) and their byproducts as obvious synthetics. Irradiation had not been seriously considered or discussed, nor had the use of municipal sewage or biosolids. The irony is that food irradiation, genetically engineered organisms, and municipal sludge are already highly controversial subjects, even in mainstream agro-food systems. That they could be thought to be appropriate to a set of standards for organic production and handling indicates the most profound kind of cognitive dissonance. Referring to the big three, one organic farmer from Oregon remarked, "Those have never been a part of organic farming. And if the USDA were to take the proposed rule and eliminate those from it, we would still have a terrible rule" (DeCou, 1998: 15).

Taken as a whole, the proposed rule tends to efface the distinctions between organic and conventional agriculture, and to undermine long-existing traditions of organic philosophy and practice. Organic advocates argue that this erasure would open the way for entry into the organic sector by unscrupulous growers, handlers, and processors, thus creating more, rather than less, potential for increased consumer confusion. This of course contradicts the expressed purpose of the OFPA in the first place. Many of the commentators in the public hearings are not only critical of the USDA proposed rule, but of conventional agriculture and the industrialized agro-food system altogether, which are seen as having an undue influence on the process behind closed doors.<sup>7</sup> As one member of the Washington State Organic Advisory Board put it:

... the rules as currently proposed give the impression that the NOP would be a sort of Trojan horse attempting to introduce an alien agenda into the organic industry. It is difficult not to perceive that these agendas are the very same ones generally embedded in USDA policies which give the impression that the USDA is an agent of large agribusiness interests ... (Fairhall, 1998: 32)

Or, as a small farmer from eastern Washington has it,

What I'd like to say is that the proposed rule is not consistent with time-tested and proven methods of organic agriculture. We can only construe them to be an attempt by conventional agriculture and processors to steal the hard-earned confidence built between organic producers and consumers. (Coronea, 1998: 211)

The alternative and oppositional character of organic farming becomes especially evident under the circumstances.

The most prominent and perhaps most problematic part of the proposed rule is the National List (section 205.2-), which delineates allowed and prohibited substances. The proposed rule introduces a large and confusing array of new materials to be allowed in organic farming, disregarding and contradicting NOSB recommendations. This is in direct violation of the OFPA, which states, "The Secretary [of Agriculture] cannot, at any time, add synthetic materials to the National List that are not first recommended by the NOSB" (Youngberg et al., 1998: 33). Aside from the apparent illegality of such modifications, one of the fundamental issues raised in proposing a much expanded list of allowable substances is the criteria by which such substances are evaluated as appropriate or not. This is related to the problem of different, and potentially incommensurable, epistemologies. Here the question of what counts as legitimate knowledge comes into focus. The proposed rule calls into question traditional organic prohibitions of synthetic inputs. But as John Haapala, an organic farmer and the Director of Oregon Tilth Research and Education points out,

The proposed rule attempts to shift organics from a process-based standard to a product-based standard. Rather than intentionally fostering soil fertility, creating balanced cycles, preserving resources, and respecting diversity, the proposed rule suggests that organic farming should have no "measurable impact" and that the product not be cytotoxic. (Haapala, 1998: 52–53)

Gene Kahn, NOSB member and founder of Cascadian Farms in Washington, asserts, "Organics is a way of life. It's a belief system, if you will. Our traditions do not need to be scrutinized by the so-called scientific approach" (Kahn, 1998: 37). The stipulation "no measurable degradation" (USDA, 1997: 65887), is foreign both to established organic practices and standards, and the NOSB's recommendations. But this kind of terminology is introduced as a rationale for including numerous substances on the national list explicitly prohibited by the NOSB.

The animal husbandry section (205.13–15) of the rule raises objections related to environmental and public health issues (which include a moral dimension as well), in that it proposes to allow up to 20% non-organic feeds, depending on vague circumstances, and also permits animals to be raised in confined feedlot-style situations. NOSB recommendations stipulate 100% organic feeds, and require that livestock have access to pasture and open air. Objections were raised based on fertility management, soil ecology, and

ground water pollution, as well as the overall health of the animals and the quality of the final products. Moreover, these are subsumed by moral considerations. "I do not want to eat products associated with the cruel and unnatural treatment of livestock. It's not consistent with the term "organic" as I have come to know it" (Abrahamson, 1998: 203).

These are long established practices with national and international consensus . . . it would be an abomination to allow meat products from animals raised in confinement to be sold as organic. Consumers of organic meats purchase these in large part as a result of knowing that the animals have been humanely raised . . . (Fairhall, 1998: 32).

There is also ambiguous language about the use of antibiotics and feed additives, based both on the supposition of a contingent need for these when organic methods fail, and again, the notion of no measurable difference in meat products that have been raised with such substances. In response to this, an organic beef and grain grower from the Palouse region of Washington State commented, "The USDA has requested scientific evidence that organic principles work and that certain conventional practices are not necessary. We offer our fourth generation cattle herd which has been raised on free-range organic pasture and 100 percent organic feed for over 14 years as proof that this works" (Repp, 1998: 40).

Another widely criticized aspect of the rule is the labeling section (205.103, 205.301), which disallows any additional language or label that differentiates a product or claims higher standards than the generic USDA seal. Organic partisans argue that the proposed rule sets exceedingly low standards, yet at the same time does not allow practitioners of higher standards to differentiate themselves. Good organic growers will want to distinguish their farms and their farming practices from such inferior standards. By imposing a generic USDA label, and prohibiting the use of other labels or other language to express differences, the proposed rule sets a virtual ceiling on organic standards (and other alternative farming practices). Farmers have a right to farm above and beyond Federal standards, to have this verified, and to be recognized for it. A small farmer from Chinook, Montana, put it this way, "In reading through the proposed rule, I find it all garbage. I look at it as something that puts a cap on the standards that we are now living by as OCIA [Organic Crop Improvement Association] producers. It does not allow us to take the high road. It caps the standards at the USDA level, which are very low" (Hinebauch, 1998: 21). And this is directly related to the consumer's right to know. The rule usurps the right of consumers to make informed choices about their food supply. "Con-

sumers have the right to information about how their food is produced. And the organic movement needs constant incentives to higher standards. It must be made very clear that the USDA's standards are a minimum and not a maximum standard" (Peterson, 1998: 188).

The issues of standards and labeling are closely related to questions about the certification process. The proposed rule, it is argued, undermines and weakens the already well-established processes and practices of private certification agencies, such as CCOF and Oregon and Washington Tilth, which are meant to guarantee sound stewardship practices. It compromises the role and authority of independent certifiers, complicates the bureaucratic process (interfering with both certifiers and growers to an excessive degree) and confuses the checks and balances between accreditation, certification, and farmer innovation and feedback. The language in the proposed rule has been criticized as excessively vague and ambiguous, leaving too much room for lax interpretations by growers, processors, distributors, certifiers, etc. Critics claim that it would be easier to be fraudulent under the proposed rule than it is now. The language of already existing state programs such as the California Organic Foods Production Act, or the Washington Organic Program, for example, is said to be much more precise and prescriptive, and thus certifiable and enforceable. For instance, the proposed rule does not sufficiently address the issue of what is considered proper soil husbandry, nor does it recognize the ideal of good land stewardship, which is at the foundation of the organic tradition, even though such principles are outlined in detail by agencies like CCOF, Tilth, and IFOAM.

Organic certification is a grassroots miracle. Over several decades, certifiers have provided a great service to consumers. Many people, primarily farmers, have given years of their lives working long and hard hours to establish organic standards. These are independent, strong-minded people with strong convictions who spent thousands of hours in meetings arguing, discussing, and creating consensus on new and stronger standards. This has been a ratcheting-up process. As we learned more, organic standards got stricter.

We are here today because we do not want the work and integrity of all those people in all those years, and the confidence of so many consumers, to be buried. (Clark, 1998: 29)

The grassroots process of learning, sharing knowledge, and gradually and cooperatively developing guidelines of organic practice begs the question of whether a national program was needed in the first place, when already existing regional programs had

set a standard recognized around the nation and indeed around the world. One finds amongst movement members a deep ambivalence about the appropriateness of national legislation, and questions about whose interests it really serves.

For example, although the NOPPR makes reference to the predominance of small-scale growers in the organic sector, it proposes a regressive flat fee (section 205.422) that would be more burdensome to smaller growers. "We view the proposed flat fee schedule to be particularly unfair because fees for small growers and handlers would be disproportionately more than for large growers and handlers" (McEvoy, 1998: 19). It is interesting to note also that the proposed rule appears to be in conflict with the report and recommendations of another group within USDA, the Commission on Small Farms. Organic farming has been widely considered to be almost synonymous with small-scale farming. The USDA Commission on Small Farms Report, *A Time to Act* (1998), confirmed this when it identified organic farming as the best venue within which small-scale growers might succeed. But, as one Idaho organic grower asked, "Does the USDA care about the future of small farms and family farms? Why would the USDA eliminate one of the few profitable venues that family farmers have? Why would an ecologically sound, profitable segment of agriculture be such a threat to the USDA?" (Jones, 1998: 110).

The rationale given by the USDA for suggested changes to the original NOSB recommendations is couched in the language of risk assessment and risk management. This approach is based on supposedly scientific evidence; for instance, the concept of "measurable degradation," which would not necessarily justify the prohibition of certain materials or practices. Such logic is directly challenged by several individuals testifying at the hearings. Bill Wolf of the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI), speaking at a California Department of Agriculture Hearing in Salinas, pointed out that the organic movement is not required to offer scientific justifications, and that there may be other, equally valid rationalities at work. He asserted that it is the prerogative of the organic community to set its own standards as it sees fit (Wolf, 1998). Several respondents compared organic stipulations to those of Kosher foods. That is, a cultural tradition irreducible to strictly scientific definitions. In his testimony in Ontario, Brian Baker, formerly with CCOF and now also with OMRI, states that,

...organic is based on a holistic approach and a precautionary principle. The precautionary principle is risk averse. The operating dictum is to do the least harm, to be very conservative when making changes in technology ... It's a holistic approach

as opposed to reductionism. It looks at the health of the entire system rather than simple models of the harm done by single causes. So I'm putting before you the precautionary principle, and holism is no less valid a model for scientific and technological decision-making than the risk assessment model that pervades the preamble and proposed rule. The precautionary principle of holism is far more compatible with organic principles. (Baker, 1998: 21–22)

In these transcripts, such fundamental points are made repeatedly, and a picture of the movement as a whole begins to emerge that, it would seem, cannot be reduced to or captured by government regulations. As Jeff Fairhall of the Washington State Organic Advisory Board argues, "The proposed rule seems determined to reduce the definition of organic food down to one dictated by a purely scientific reductionist paradigm . . . The fact is that this runs irreconcilably against the grain of the organic industry, which is based on a holistic world view" (Fairhall, 1998: 33).

The criticism at these hearings, then, is not simply about technicalities. Nor is it merely about market share or economic growth. It of course includes these concerns, but consistently goes beyond them. As Anthony Rodale says, "...for us at the Rodale Institute, organic foods are more than a super growth industry. They represent a natural connection between people and the land. Organic foods are a symbol of a way of life, a way of helping nature regenerate not only human but natural resources as well . . ." (Rodale, 1998: 74). Larger agrarian questions are being raised, and questions about people and nature. The organic ideal posits or implies a special bond with nature, which is constantly being expressed through the key concept of health, where the health of the body is intimately entwined with, and analogous to, the health of the land and the food that it produces. The hearings convey a distinct sense of the incommensurability of industrial and organic approaches to agricultural production, and of the ideas of nature that inhere in these two different knowledge systems and worldviews.

### **Organic farming and the politics of nature**

How are we to interpret the present impasse between the organic farming movement and the USDA? As we have already noted, it is problematic to refer to the movement as if it were one homogenous entity, with a more or less unified position. While the opposition to the NOPPR has been remarkably unanimous, it is important to remember, as many of the respondents pointed out, that the organic farming movement has

emerged over several decades through an intensely local grassroots process (cf. Buttel, 1997: 353). The idea of national, as well as international, standards has been part of an ongoing conversation, a complicated set of negotiations and contestations, for a very long time. For example, the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM), founded in 1972, which includes 750 member organizations and institutions from more than 100 countries, has developed a set of "Basic Standards for Organic Production and Processing" (IFOAM, 1998), which have been periodically revised over the past twenty-five years, and represent an ongoing effort to build consensus amongst organic practitioners from around the world. Hence, there exists a continuing dialogue encompassing multiple and heterogeneous organic food and farming constituencies, at local, regional, national, and international levels.

Organic farming, I would suggest, is a quintessential example of the dialectic of "militant particularism and global ambition" (Harvey, 1996). Harvey, through an exegesis of the work of Raymond Williams, uses this concept to explore the problems and potentials of progressive socio-ecological and political-economic movements. "Ideals forged out of the affirmative experience of solidarities in one place get generalized and universalized as a working model of a new form of society that will benefit all of humanity" (Harvey, 1996: 32). Organic farming both proffers a critique of the (globalizing) hegemony of productionist agribusiness, and proposes a new vision of society-nature as a whole. This new vision focuses especially on the socio-ecological relations of production, which are rooted in the specificity of place. "What is at stake here [as Harvey explains] is a crucial ability (attached to the thesis of militant particularism in dialogue with universalizing politics) to use what we now call 'standpoint' . . . and location (place) to create a critical space from which to challenge hegemonic discourses . . ." (Harvey, 1996: 101), thus opening up new possibilities for alternative emancipatory projects.

Organic farming encompasses an enormous range of social, cultural, and natural diversity across space and time. As a socio-ecological project, it tends to emphasize local knowledge and sense of place (Buttel, 1997: 354–356). This is partly because of the highly nuanced ecological variation, the specific agroecological differences that occur at meso and micro levels, from the farm-scale to the watershed to the region. The success of organic practices is often closely correlated to landscape heterogeneity (Bunce et al., 1993; Forman and Godron, 1986; Wilcove et al., 1986). As Buttel (1997: 349) has noted, "...it is important to begin with the recognition that there is essentially no such thing as a global agro-ecosystem," rather,

“agro-ecosystem development is a congeries of *local* processes.”

This may be construed as one reason why scale is considered important, and small farms are favored as a basic component of the organic ideal. The idea of stability in diversity still holds, despite current trends in some streams of academic ecology. We can see that this view of nature tends to support a decentralized, grassroots model of politics and economy as well. As Williams (1980: 71) noted, whenever we talk about nature we are always already talking about society too.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on direct marketing and face to face relations of trust is an example of this in practice. Although we may often tend to think of the organic farming movement as a single unified entity, there are actually many different organic farming movements emerging and existing in many places and regions around the country and around the world. Each one must deal with specific problems of production, reproduction, survival, livelihood, and so on. And yet, simultaneously, they are being networked (at times more or less cohesively) into a movement of (at least potentially) global importance.

Even as we recognize the specificity of local knowledges as integral to organic farming systems, the science of agroecology suggests that it is possible to articulate some general principles of organic land husbandry that pertain around the globe (cf. Altieri, 1995; Gliessman, 1998; Worster, 1990). Such principles, based on close observation of, and intimate interaction with, the natural world, may be translated into certain precepts (what Harvey calls “foundational values”) about the human relation to nature that lead to the notion of stewardship (Thompson, 1995; Jackson et al., 1984; Leopold, 1949), the idea that the land is to be held in a sacred trust. Thus organic farming has traditionally included a concept of the sacred (Hecht, 1995), expressed as reverence and respect, which extends to all of nature, within which human society itself is embedded. Such a view engenders what Sarah Whatmore calls an “intersubjective relational ethics of care” (Whatmore, 1997), which informs (ideally) the total praxis of the organic farming way of life. It is worth noting here, as Whatmore has it, that “This wider ethical compass frequently relies upon the evocation of a spiritual dimension to ‘being in the world’ which resonates uneasily with the intellectual register of the academy” (Whatmore, 1997: 45; see also Barlett, 1997: 45; and Clancy, 1997b).

Organic farming and agroecology signal, among other things, an epistemological shift, away from the positivist reductionism of modern science, and the mechanistic instrumentalism of industrial capital. Such an approach seeks to recuperate a broader con-

ception of practical reason. It transcends the narrowly proscribed boundaries of instrumental rationality, and includes multiple vernacular knowledge systems and/or traditional ecological knowledges, as these are applied in diverse agroecosystems. Organic farming includes a continuum of local knowledges, which at the same time incorporate and are informed by certain broader forms of traditional knowledge, as well as more generalizable modern scientific knowledge. It is thus a hybrid of place-based (local/regional), traditional, and scientific epistemologies, with strong normative values attached to what is considered appropriate or good practice. Any given expression of organic agriculture will demonstrate its own unique blend of these categories (cf. Hassanein and Kloppenburg, 1995; Kloppenburg, 1991). These kinds of alternative knowledge become the basis of politics and philosophy, which in turn informs the grassroots social movement dimension and the involvement and engagement of civil society. Organic farming, in all its diverse manifestations, implies a fundamentally different kind of worldview and cultural ethos (cf. Geertz 1973: 126), with a qualitatively different orientation to people-nature relations. The aesthetic and ethical content of this view can be observed in the practices of organic farmers, the socio-ecological processes in which they participate, and the agricultural landscapes that they produce and maintain. The cultures of organic agriculture and horticulture, however varied they may be, do present a substantive set of common values that have the potential to engender strong “trans-difference” solidarities amongst practitioners and supporters. This alternative epistemology ultimately points to a different way of life. A different vision of society-in-nature, reinhabiting the middle landscape. As Latour has noted, “all questions of epistemology are questions of social order,” for the simple reason that “the social context contains as one of its subsets the definition of what counts as good science” (Latour, 1993: 25–26), and hence what counts for legitimate knowledge and action/practice. Organic farming has thus called into question the dualistic modernist ontology that objectifies nature and keeps it separate from, and thus subservient to, society (cf. Goodman, 1999; FitzSimmons and Goodman, 1998).

The ideological lineaments of organic farming described thus far represent an historically persistent cultural paradigm (Youngberg, 1984; Boeringa, 1980). Yet, perhaps ironically, this paradigm may be increasingly called into question by the burgeoning economic successes that organic farming has recently been enjoying. One of the most salient concerns raised in the public hearings has to do with the potential (and already incipient) industrialization of organic farm-

ing. The increasing growth of the market for organic foods tends to precipitate a process of bifurcation, wherein the grassroots movement of philosophically committed small scale growers is separated from larger scale capitalized operators, who may still technically qualify as organic, but who, perhaps, otherwise eschew the movement's basic ideology. The worry is that organic farming might be transformed into something else, something much more amenable to the already existing conventional agro-food system, and still be called "organic," effectively deleting the social, political, and philosophical content from the term.

### Conclusion: Possible rural worlds

Our main handicap will be lack of imagination. . . . This is one of those times when only dreamers will turn out to be practical men.  
(Mumford in Lappé, 1990: 158)

The controversies surrounding the organic farming movement raised by the prospect of national regulation have elicited a number of difficult questions. Included among these are concerns about the identity and status of organic farming in itself, both as a self-consciously organized social movement, and an economic activity, a niche market, currently experiencing tremendous growth. The proposed rule has caused organic partisans to stop and reflect upon basic assumptions about the nature and character of organics, and its future possibilities. It has also engendered a renewed and reinvigorated organizing effort. What appeared at first to be a crisis was vigorously seized as an opportunity, resulting in an unprecedented popular response to, and repudiation of, the NOPPR.

To recapitulate, among the arguments raised at the USDA hearings, some of the most salient centered on the role of science, in combination or conflict with other kinds of vernacular or traditional knowledges, and especially the perceived incompatibility of holistic versus narrowly scientific, (i.e., reductionist/positivist) epistemologies. It was argued that a holistic approach is closely related to the precautionary principle and the precepts of non-harming and good stewardship. The moral and ethical dimensions of good organic farming were emphasized, especially with regard to animal husbandry. High ecological and ethical standards are integral to consumer trust and solidarity, and hence the continuing growth of the market for organically grown products. Already existing organic standards are based on a grassroots tradition. This represents decades of work of innumerable small-scale growers engaged in an ongoing process of hands

on learning, sharing knowledge, and working together to refine principles and practices, and thus to define rigorous standards.

The NOPPR focused on organic products as commodities while ignoring the socio-ecological processes and practices of organic production. What the controversy boils down to is the hegemony of market logic versus a broader conception of the moral ecology of organics. The original aspirations of organic farming go far beyond capturing a share of the market. Yet the market place itself is the primary nexus where consumers express their preferences. The organic consumer's interests center around the food supply, including food safety and nutrition issues, but reach beyond these household concerns to embrace an *idea* of the good life or the good society that includes some notion of the right relationship to nature. Organic farming has been widely perceived as exemplifying such virtues.

The public's perception of organic farming resonates strongly with the agrarian ideal of the middle landscape, a still compelling part of the American mythos. What kind of rural society can foster both the best care of the land, and a truly democratic, participatory agrarian economy? The movement and/or industry now finds itself in a paradoxical situation. Is it possible to reduce organics to a set of technology packages and input substitutions (cf. Rosset and Altieri, 1997), devoid of social, political, and philosophical content? Will organic farming simply be coopted by the productionist paradigm? Beyond the possible contents of any given rule or set of regulations, the organic community must self-consciously engage in critical debates that recognize and take seriously its role as a leading exemplar of sustainable agriculture. What do we want the middle landscape to look like? Is a small-holder based agriculture still a viable and desirable model (cf. Netting, 1993)? If so, how can such a model be cultivated and sustained?

The contested arena around organic farming presents an opportunity for re-envisioning an embodied green politics that begins with the fundamental recognition that knowing nature occurs on the ground through work, through the socially organized relations and practices of production endemic to all forms of agriculture. If we are to address the environmental and social issues of our time, it behooves us to recognize the foundational role of agriculture in mediating society-nature relations; the realm where issues of ecological sustainability and human well-being are inextricably interrelated. At the opening of the twenty-first century, humanity is searching for alternative visions. The public debate over national organic standards gives some indication of what is at stake, and demonstrates the potential on the part of civil soci-

ety to participate in grassroots environmental social movements in support of alternative agriculture.

## Notes

1. At the outset, it is important to note that organic farming can not be viewed simply as a single unified or homogeneous social movement or political agenda, nor as only one particular style of agriculture. One can identify a diverse range of perspectives and practices that fall under the rubric of organics. Most significantly, it is important to try to distinguish between the organic farming *movement* (as a "traditional" grassroots coalition of small-scale producers), and the nascent organic farming *industry*.
2. Resistance to the scientization and industrialization of agriculture can be found amongst diverse groups of farmers in Europe and North America during the interwar period, even though the term "organic" was not in use. A key example is the emergence of the biodynamic movement in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s (Schilthuis, 1994).
3. Lady Eve Balfour, co-founder of the Soil Association, and author of *The Living Soil* (1943). Sir Albert Howard's most influential work is *The Soil and Health* (1947).
4. It should be acknowledged that the USDA is not in actuality a monolithic entity. But it often appears to be so from the point of view of self-identified members of the organic movement. The governmental/regulatory process in this case has a "black box" quality to outsiders, and remains mysterious and confusing. Unpacking the inner workings of the government's part in this regulation certainly merits further research, but is beyond the scope of the present essay.
5. The NOSB was originally to be comprised of 14 members, "4 organic farmers, 2 organic handlers, 1 owner or operator of a retail establishment with significant trade in organic products, 3 experts in environmental protection and resource conservation, 3 representatives of public interest or consumer interest groups, and 1 expert in the field of toxicology, ecology, or biochemistry" (USDA, 1997).
6. Again, the terms community, movement, or industry should be loosely construed, representing a more or less diffusely organized or heterogeneous group of people or organizations tending toward or favoring a generalized common goal or goals, and not at all without internal differences, even regarding those common goals.
7. Again, the "black-boxed" nature of the rule-making process from the time NOSB submitted its recommendations to the release of the proposed rule by the USDA makes this a matter of speculation, but nevertheless a widespread suspicion amongst organic partisans. NOSB Chair Robert Anderson asserted at the Seattle hearing that the proposed rule was very close to NOSB recommendations when it left the NOP to be reviewed by the Office of Budget and Management (OMB). According to Anderson, it was the OMB that radically changed the rule (Anderson, 1998: 63).
8. See also Worster (1977), especially chapter 15, "Declarations of Interdependence," and Barbour (1996).

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