

The Moral Ecology of Organics

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The issue of the relationship between humans and the environments in which they live has long been central to anthropological inquiry. However, it has taken on increasing relevance as the survival of human societies is threatened by the destruction of the non-human world. This raises a number of ethical issues that are being explored increasingly particularly under the name of bioethics. However, the literature on agricultural ethics is mostly limited to the debate over livestock practices, and alternative agriculture is only beginning to receive attention from social scientists interested in ethical issues. Yet values often lie behind the choice to adopt non-conventional approaches to farming. This research focuses on knowledge, practice and values among organic farmers in Québec. It uses qualitative research methods (including about 40 in-depth face-to-face interviews) with organic farmers from four large regions in Québec to develop an anthropological approach to organic agriculture as both social movement and embodied practice.

In this paper I will explore the ethics of responsibility – for various life forms, for wild and domesticated “nature,” and for human communities – embodied by organic farmers in their daily work and in their ways of producing and sharing various forms of knowledge. I will also discuss other ethical, socio-ecological and political values, such as caring for others, caring for the land, community involvement, education and health promotion that can found among organic farmers in Québec. Far from a uniform social and ethical landscape, farmers’ views of ideal practice, their spiritual convictions, and their commitment to specific forms of organic farming vary widely. Those points of divergence and convergence are part of the wealth of material that I will draw on in exploring the tensions between the local and the global, between the production imperative and respect for natural processes, between innovation and conformity to a highly regulated legal environment, and between scientific knowledge and empirical, embodied knowledge.

Farmers have long been considered a symbol of a life lived in harmony with nature. They have been equated with stewardship of the land, intimacy and connection with the natural cycles of the seasons, birth, death and renewal. The agrarian lifestyle has long stood in opposition to an urban industrial lifestyle that has been viewed as a source of pollution and, in the minds of many, of degraded values and vice. In contrast, farming has traditionally been perceived as an ecological livelihood where the various farm activities are carried out in balance with each other and with nature, and the farming community generally has been associated with solid, traditional (Christian) values such as the virtue of hard work, frugality, efficiency, sobriety, self-reliance and stewardship of the land

(Thompson in Lockeretz 2000). As we know, much of that has changed. Over the past few decades, farming has increasingly become viewed as a source of pollution and unethical treatment of animals, and farmers are not necessarily believed to be more virtuous than other citizens. As industrial agriculture has become more and more widespread, agricultural products have come to be seen as commodities; like other goods with a price tag attached, consumers are mostly unaware of the socio-ecological processes and practices underlying their production.

Organic farming, as a set of ecological production and land management practices, and as an environmental social movement emerged out of a desire to move away from the productivist paradigm that had taken over much of mainstream agriculture. It has sought to re-embed crop and livestock practices in ecological processes, and to a large extent has also challenged the socially destructive relations that characterise the global agro-food system (Raynolds, 2000). Over many years of experimentation, observation, and experience, organic farmers have developed alternative practices and knowledge based on ecological values that propose a different ethic for relating to other humans and to the non-human world, what we tend to lump together under the word “nature.”

The question of agricultural practice raises a host of issues concerning our relationship to nature, our connection to our food, and our responsibility for the environment in general, but specifically for soil, animals, agricultural land, the health of consumers, and future generations. These questions are not just pragmatic issues of how best to farm; they are also ethical issues. I do not wish to suggest that all organic farmers share the same set of values or world view. In fact, increasingly there are tensions between highly committed small-scale producers and a growing organic industry (Vos 2000). However, I believe that a large number of organic farmers do share certain ideas and values that inform the actions and interactions that structure their farm activities. Their knowledge-based practices embody notions of respect, commitment, relationship, caring, social justice and responsibility, for various elements of both the non-human world and human communities. In this paper I will be asking: What values do organic farmers embody? What vision do they have of an ideal relationship between humans and non-human life? What different forms of ethics motivate organic farmers?

This paper is based on PhD research that I am carrying out in anthropology at Laval University in Québec. I have completed about 40 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with organic farmers from around Québec. However, I have not yet begun to analyse the interviews or articles from the press, and so what I have to say at this stage is more based on impressions than on final research results. The farmers are fairly equally spread over a range of productive activities (dairy, livestock, market gardening, maple syrup, medicinal plants, and grains) and they live in a wide range of geographical, economic and social environments.

An ethic of responsibility has been explored in depth by the philosopher Hans Jonas in his book *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984 [1979]). In it, he outlines an ethic of responsibility that would take into account our relatively recent power to destroy all life on earth. In his view, the destructive power of man through modern technologies places a

burden of responsibility on our shoulders: non-human nature now has a moral claim on us. As we have extended our power, and therefore our capacity to harm, so have we extended our responsibility for all life forms, which are the necessary condition for continued human life on earth and the survival of future generations. How can such a broad and abstract notion be embodied in everyday acts?

First, while few individuals can have any sense of responsibility for the future of the planet as a whole, many organic farmers show an individual, personal sense of commitment to a specific piece of land that has been entrusted to them. They speak of how they have enriched the soil, diversified the range of plants, bushes and trees growing on their land, and attracted a greater variety of birds, insects, bees, earthworms, snakes, bats, frogs, etc... They act where they can, on a very local scale, in their immediate environment.

Their sense of responsibility is also evident in the way they care for their animals. Because they cannot use antibiotics, except to save an animal's life, they must focus mainly on prevention, and therefore pay close attention to an animal's health, its living conditions, even its emotional state. They must develop empirical and theoretical knowledge of homeopathy and naturopathy for treating farm animals, a field that vets are only just beginning to learn themselves.

Organic farmers, especially those who sell directly to clients, often feel a particular responsibility for providing healthy, nourishing, reliable, and varied food to their communities. This is most true of CSA (community supported agriculture) farms where they meet their clients each week and get direct feedback on what people liked or did not like, had too much of or not enough, found too spicy, didn't know what to do with, could not identify, etc. The real and symbolic importance of this form of connection between urban-dwellers and local farmers and farmlands is increasingly valued by urbanites who feel cut off from their food supply and are more and more distrustful of the food on the shelves of large grocery chains. For the farmer, a CSA project is an opportunity to be paid fairly for high-quality produce, and to receive part of the payment in advance, but it is also a chance to develop relationships with the people who will be eating that food. The care that goes into putting together the food baskets each week can at times border on the obsessive; some farmers were even told by their clients that they gave them too much and wouldn't make any money. One client even said she cried when she saw the edible flowers that had been lovingly placed in a small plastic box inside the basket!

However, the relationship to their partners is an ambivalent one: as pleasant as it can be to deal with appreciative clients who share the farmer's values, it can also be frustrating to deal with those who are demanding or disrespectful. Some CSA farms are considering accepting partners on the basis of shared views and need rather than on a first-come, first-served basis. The commitment to a positive relationship with clients (the eaters) also includes education: many CSA farms insert recipes, information on the nutritional content of certain foods, and suggestions for preserving vegetables in their weekly deliveries.

The various means of direct marketing, be they farmers markets, farm stands, food baskets or local coops heighten the sense of community. Some farmers are deciding not to send carcasses to Montreal anymore, for example, instead finding a local butcher and then selling directly to clients in their area. The bureaucratic restrictions in the area of meat packing, however, often place obstacles in the way of such initiatives. Still, local sales are viewed as positive contributions to community development and a more ecological food system.

My observations are that organic farmers are highly committed, and very open to sharing information and their own knowledge and skills with others in the field. While official training programmes, publications, and sources of information are still relatively limited, particularly in French, much of what farmers learn comes from contacts with other farmers, through farm visits, workshops, clubs, personal contacts, and internships. In addition to their own observations, trials and errors, they consult other farmers who work in the same or similar types of production. Far from keeping their knowledge to themselves, they share generously, which it seems to me, conveys a concern for the success of other organic farmers and a desire to see the sector as whole prosper. In fact, farmers often collaborate to produce different crops, to sell each other's produce, to share equipment or trade favours. Those with a farm stand selling vegetables and fruit will often offer to sell meat from a neighbour who raises organic cattle, pigs, lambs or chickens, for instance, and some CSAs include local cheeses or meats in their baskets. This speaks to me of an ethic of cooperation and mutual assistance.

Many of these examples regarding the creation of alternative food networks and collaborative efforts to breathe new life into local economies are also issues of social justice. Many organic farmers expressed concern over the availability and accessibility of organic food for lower-income families. In fact, many of them have made very conscious decisions not to sell to distributors because the retail price paid by clients would be too high. Instead they favour direct marketing, solidarity cooperatives, bulk purchases, and other means for cutting out middle-men and pooling efforts. In many cases, this is a matter of survival, as they are often disadvantaged by the current agro-food system where large groceries are no longer willing (or able?) to purchase from a greater number of local farmers, instead requiring large volumes from a single distributor. Many organic farmers are therefore excluded from supplying their local grocery store, even if it does sell organic produce. Instead, the large chains (which are almost the only ones in many places) import organic vegetables from the USA or larger farms further afield.

As the fair trade movement becomes more and more widespread and well-known, and as consumers are more and more aware of the importance of buying fair trade coffee and chocolate from poorer countries in the South, many organic farmers wonder to what extent they are receiving a fair price for their labour, and whether their working conditions are just. Virtually all the farmers I met with felt that their work was worthwhile, and many had a strong conviction that the values it promoted in a society focused increasingly on getting and spending, provided an alternative vision that needs defending in today's world. Their involvement in feeding their communities and in creating greater food security is concrete and tangible. Yet many of them earn very little, and some even run deficits year after year. As in the conventional farming sector, many

households depend on the income of a family member to fill the gap in the family's financial needs. It seems that many spouses have taken the government's place in subsidising organic agriculture.

One sore spot, given their relatively low incomes, is the fact that organic farmers have to pay a considerable amount of money to prove that their methods do indeed comply with the certification requirements, while other farmers are not asked to justify their production methods. There is a growing feeling that the cost of certification should be reimbursed by the Ministry of Agriculture, which would be a way to show government support for the sector and to take some of the financial burden off the shoulders of those who choose to farm organically. In addition, it would constitute a recognition of the contribution that organic farmers make to greater environmental and consumer health and to increased biodiversity, for example.

Access to land is also a social justice concern of great importance in today's context. Few farmers starting out can afford good farmland in the regions closest to urban centres or even marginal land further away. As elsewhere in North America, rural properties are being purchased by well-off city-dwellers as country homes, with the resulting rise in land prices. Issues of rurality and rural revitalisation are therefore becoming the object of much debate. The countryside in Québec, as elsewhere, has been emptied, first, of its supports for agriculture, such as dairies, slaughterhouses, butcher shops, bakeries and other businesses that have been centralised and concentrated, and secondly, as a direct consequence, of its inhabitants. The organic farming movement is part of a process to re-inhabit the countryside and create small-scale businesses that breathe life into rural municipalities across Quebec. The number of farmer's cheeses, pâtés, game meats, preserves and fresh fruits and vegetables available today is incomparable even to what there was 5 years ago. If the "right to farm," or access to land, or "right to a decent livelihood" are part of what is considered socially just, then these issues need to be addressed for the future of organic farming in Quebec. Several of the organic farmers I interviewed expressed a concern for finding a young farmer to take over when they retire. Rather than sell to the highest bidder, they would like to find a way of transferring the farm gradually or taking the person on as an apprentice to begin with.

Although a number of the ethical concerns shared by farmers are focused on their local communities, many of them express a concern for the global picture. In keeping with the old adage, they act locally but think of the global context as more and more people are dying of starvation each day, and conventional agriculture's promise to solve world hunger has not been entirely fulfilled. As producers of food in a nation of "haves" they are acutely aware that there something is wrong with this picture.

In spite of all these musings about ethics and values, most organic farmers say they are not out to try to "change the world" or be activists in the sense of transforming large-scale structures, be they economic, political, social or otherwise. Instead, their choice is to live a lifestyle in keeping with their convictions, which contributes positively to their community, and offers an example of a livelihood that respects the environment and other humans. They are committed to an alternative that embodies the environmental, health,

social and spiritual values they believe in. The strength of the organic movement is precisely in this embodiment of more abstract values – through hard work and concrete action, physical products and real relationships – not just discourse and ideas. Breaking down the environmental actions needed today into embodied acts offers an antidote to the sense of powerlessness facing many. Sustaining a dialogical relationship to plants and animals, the soil, the water and the micro-organisms that maintain life on earth are part of the ethical response that organic farmers have to offer to the crises facing agriculture today. To quote philosopher Val Plumwood (2002) the most important task of our time is to re-situate humans in ecological terms and non-humans in ethical terms. In my view, organic farmers are working quietly, discreetly, but surely, on that task.

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