



Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California

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In an era of escalating food politics, many believe organic farming to be the agrarian answer. In this first comprehensive study of organic farming in California, Julie Guthman casts doubt on the current wisdom about organic food and agriculture, at least as it has evolved in the Golden State. Refuting popular portrayals of organic agriculture as a small-scale family farm endeavor in opposition to "industrial" agriculture, Guthman explains how organic farming has replicated what it set out to oppose.

Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California Details

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sdw says

This is a book that needed to be written. Guthman's focus is the organic industry in California. Her argument is that size doesn't matter or that at least it doesn't matter as much as the "small is beautiful" agrarian ideal would have us believe. She says that the small-family farm does not guarantee food produced in a socially or environmentally just fashion. It is not enough to buy organic food but is also not enough to buy food produced by small-local farms (She prefaces all this by making it very clear that she buys organic food and that organic food from small local farms is better than other food you could buy).

She describes several problems with the agrarian ideal including its exploitation of the labor of women and children, and its reliance on land ownership (and land ownership has been determined through racist laws). She argues that California has never been an agrarian state, as the native groups were not agrarian and large land holdings predominated at least from statehood on. If the organic movement was at some level originally a critique of capitalism, it is difficult for functioning organic farms of any size to not exist as an actual alternative to capitalism today. The land itself becomes the commodity at the root of the agrarian ideal. She offers CSAs as one possibility of hope, as those who purchase a CSA come to share the risks of the farm with the owner.

Jamie says

Key point: Organic does not mean Sustainable!

Joel says

Interesting, but I don't see much value in criticizing something worthwhile like organics.

D says

Rating this book doesn't feel like it makes sense as a non-academic, but nevertheless Guthman details many sides and paradoxes surrounding Organic agriculture in California and provided a ton of detail and evidence to back up her claims. By the final chapter, her arguments against voluntary labels as a solution to problems in sustainable agriculture were very compelling and have given me new perspectives to consider. I'll definitely be turning to this dissertation in a book as a reference in the future.

Emily says

Aware of this book for many years, I finally sat down to read it while prepping to work through a series of Julie Guthman's articles with my students. Despite believing in organic food herself, Guthman's Agrarian

Dreams is a well-theorized and deeply researched critique of organic agriculture. Just as Guthman takes on anti-obesity campaigns and the bulk of food activism efforts in her subsequent books, she bravely critiques aspects of the food system that are assumed to be "good" and beyond reproach. She's never afraid to reveal the how, the why, and the ongoing injustices embedded in these often unquestioned aspects of the food system. She also proposes structural solutions to foster their better and fuller potentials.

Focusing on California—often referred to as America's salad bowl—Guthman shows how despite the organic promise of a more just, healthy, and fair food system, organic production now in fact mirrors the global, industrial system it initially sought to resist. Furthermore, Guthman demonstrates *how* these changes occurred, locating them within the organic food movement itself. She also explores how federal and state labeling efforts exacerbated such shifts.

Ethicurean Reads says

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Lisa says

Great, informative book on the standardization of Organics, and the driving movement which is making them more of an economic power... for better or worse. Interesting for anyone who is curious about this movement.

Phil Sacks says

Excellent though challenging read about the contradictions and omissions of the organic movement in California. At times the academic prose had me re-reading a given paragraph several times, and the economics confused me a bit, but Guthman is thoughtful and non-partisan in her examination of what and why growers choose organic production.

Jessica says

Guthman's book is unfortunately dated in some key ways (having been published in 2004, she anticipates but does not address such phenomena as the "natural" foods movement or the emergence of big organic as a phenomena so large as to be discernable.) Yet her theoretical, historical, and sociological interrogation of the emergence of the organic industry, carrying forward the philosophies of the organic movement yet subscribing to bureaucracies and formalities of industrial agriculture, still holds water and provides a model for how we should interrogate any food movement founded on the premise of a system of ethical practices. Locking down exactly what "organic" is—whether it emerges from what we put into vs. take out of the ground, what kinds of added materials are "organic" and thus acceptable, what forms of access different farmers can take in securing organic farming authorizations, and how this all translates into a price point and

ethical transaction for the consumer—is hard to locate when big org starts to look so much like big ag. If organic farming first gained credence from the 1960s because of its promise as the “agrarian answer,” a way to imagine feeding the world via the family farm, then scaling such a model of farming up to the point of profitability would inevitably fall short of farming “in nature’s image.” Through an enormous amalgamation of data about California’s organic farming practices—what is grown, by whom, and at what degree of adherence or profitability, Guthman ultimately moves beyond merely a critique of organic’s unachieved ideals, but rather shows how organic farming has actually replicated, in many ways, the practices of industrial agriculture.

But is this an avoidable equation? As Guthman notes, the standardization that emerged from certifying boards and organizations as organic farming gained in popularity may be a key part of its downfall. The more certification and federal authority needed to validate a farm as “organic,” the harder it becomes to escape the standards of bureaucracy that make it hard for large farms to innovate. (She provides sly—and slight—coverage of the inherently classed practices of small-scale “gentlemen farmers” who can innovate batch by batch of tomatoes, which makes for creative labor yet hardly provides sustainable income for a working-class farmer.) Moreover, her final critique ultimately seems to argue that the very foundation of agriculture itself—the insistence that land has value, and thus farming must produce profit—is at the core of any farming enterprise turning industrial. While that’s an interesting Marxist reading on farming practices, I don’t think it’s substantial enough to actually invalidate the organic farming movement on its own terms. Ultimately, the book is most interesting for its comparative reading of California legislative and historical initiatives as they map organic against conventional agriculture, and for its close reading through the thick web of organic valorization.

Elise Reich says

Organic farming is just another liberal anti-human delusion. It has no scientific basis, just rhetoric and products that are more expensive but not as good as scientific agriculture.

The biggest problem with AgriBusiness in America isn't that giant corporations run them, but that SUBSIDIES have been keeping ineffective farmers and yokels out in the country producing things that nobody wants. Agricultural subsidies are one of the most ancient and hallowed of the New Deal attacks on the economy, and it comes directly from this Enlightenment-Socialist notion that the 'volk' are somehow the purest of mankind (often, they're just ignorant and dirty but no better otherwise) and that the farming life has some intrinsic moral value. Cain was a farmer.

Not only will a mass return to farms not occur - at least, not unless we have a world war and mass socialist state - nor is there any good reason to do so. Wanting to isolate yourself from bad culture is much more effectively achieved by leaving the nation that offends you, rather than getting an unsustainable job in a welfare-salve to Flyover Country.

Christians can only rebuild society by embracing with full implications the working out of the market, technology and demographic shifts of the modern age. You may as well try to do handicrafts as be a farmer. Sure, a few people can make a living at it - but it's no solution, nor is there any reason it should be. This country was more than 80% agricultural when it elected Progressive war mongering eugenicists.

Jonny says

interesting critique of organic ag, but seems a little self righteous and the whole CSA is the way to go

conclusion is really weak. But the marxist critique of organics is really good.
