

THE CHALLENGE OF ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN A GLOBALISING WORLD

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Abstract

Ecological justice is a challenging concept in relation to the current development of agriculture, including organic agriculture, because it positions social and ecological interests against market liberalism and economic growth. Ecological justice concerns fairness with respect to common environments, and it is therefore closely connected to the idea of commons. The concepts of commons and ecological justice are particularly relevant to organic agriculture, which builds on close cooperation with ecological systems and cycles, and they may suggest ways to resist the pressures of globalisation and structural and technological developments.

Introduction

Like mainstream agriculture, organic agriculture is faced with the all-pervading trends of globalisation and the ensuing challenges of sustainable development. These current trends in mainstream agriculture are to some degree shared by organic agriculture. In areas that are not, at present, covered by regulations, organic agriculture tends to follow the mainstream path towards large-scale, efficient productions that use modern technologies and global trade, and organic processing, marketing, and sale is incorporated into large conventional companies (e.g., Rigby and Bown 2003). This 'modernization' and 'conventionalisation' of organic food systems has been an important factor in the recent growth of organic productions and markets. On the other hand, this development can lead to unwanted social and environmental impacts due to reduced landscape diversity, increases in food miles, greater distance between producers and consumers, unfair competition from large players, reduced food diversity, etc. And it can also put pressure on the integrity of the organic agro-ecological production systems by imposing constraints on the selection and diversity of crops, varieties and breeds.

In a wider perspective, globalisation and the mainstream approach to sustainable development have generated great resistance from many stakeholders, most noticeably developing nations, local communities, advocates of civil society, and environmentalists. Although diverse, there is a general philosophical theme that unites this resistance, that of the cause of *ecological justice* (Low and Gleeson 1998, Byrne et al. 2002). Ecological justice promotes fairness in relation to the common environment for both present and future generations and for both human and other living beings. It is thus a more comprehensive form of justice than the well-known form from political liberalism, extended to incorporate the idea that individuals have a claim on their environment and the idea that justice and fairness concern not only humans, but animals and other living organisms as well. The latter extension does, notably, not go against the traditional goals of liberalism – there is a space for a liberal ecologism that does not put the causes of non-human nature above those of humans, but see the first as intimately connected with the latter (Bell 2003, see also Baxter 2005: ch. 7).

Methodology

This paper investigates the role that ecological justice may have in relation to the present challenges for organic agriculture (see also Alrøe et al. 2005). The investigation has two interacting elements, a philosophical analysis of ecological justice in relation to other relevant concepts, such as sustainability and commons, and a discussion of how the key concepts can be put into practice to meet the challenges.

Results and brief discussion

The comprehensive, integrated view of nature and ethics that is characteristic of organic agriculture is evident in one of the original key ideas: that “the health of soil, plant, animal and man is one and indivisible,” in the words of Lady Eve Balfour (Woodward et al. 1996). This view entails a certain perspective on sustainability, which is perhaps best captured by the notion of sustainability as ‘functional integrity’ as opposed to ‘resource sufficiency’ (Thompson 1996).

Functional integrity sees humans as an integrated part of nature, based on an ecological view of nature. Humans and nature form vulnerable socio-ecological systems that have crucial elements, such as soil, crops, livestock, ecosystems, cultural values, and social institutions, which must be regenerated and reproduced over time. Functional integrity emphasizes resilience and recognizes the limits of scientific knowledge and the possible risks connected to new technologies, thereby incorporating the concept of precaution. Sustainability as resource sufficiency is an ‘accounting’ approach that focuses on how to fulfil present and future human needs for food, and on how we can measure and calculate the proper balance between present resource use and future needs based on the relation between input and output from the system. Nature is seen as ‘robust’ and separate from society, and environment and nature are considered a resource for humans.

Functional integrity has the potential to stand up against some of the present trends in mainstream agriculture and sustainable development. But functional integrity concerns the workings of the system as a whole, and such notions seem to have a limited impact in current discourses. Ecological justice, on the other hand, concerns individuals in relation to the system, and in recent years this concept (together with the related, more human-centred concept of environmental justice) has emerged as a forceful reaction to the current global trends (Low and Gleeson 1998, Byrne et al. 2002, Shrader-Frechette 2002, Baxter 2005).

Ecological justice can in particular be applied to three, related, aspects of the present trends: the commodification of hitherto commons, the externalisation of environmental and social costs, and globalisation as the erosion of barriers to distant trade and ownership.

The basis for speaking of justice with regard to the environment is that the environment is, in some sense, common to us all. The concept of ecological justice is thereby closely connected to the general idea of ‘commons’. This idea is traditionally found in relation to common lands used for grazing or gathering and debates on their commodification by way of enclosure and private property, but it has recently been used in a much broader sense (e.g., The Ecologist 1993). The question is what aspects of the environment are to be considered commons and in what respects, and what that means for ecological justice: the scope of ecological justice depends on what rights individuals and communities have on their environments.

Organic agriculture is more dependent on the environment than conventional agriculture, because it bases agricultural production on a close cooperation with natural ecological systems and processes and because it has fewer technological remedies available to counteract depletions and malfunctions of these systems. What we may call ‘ecological commons’ therefore have a special importance in organic agriculture. Nature plays a key role in the provision and reproduction of ecological commons whereas public goods are produced by human actors. This distinction is important because the provisions by nature tend to be overlooked in policy analyses directed towards the challenges of globalisation.

The question of whether something is to be considered as a commons is determined by ethical and political criteria, not by empirical criteria such as whether the benefits from the resource are excludable (can be withheld from others, e.g. the enclosure of land) or rival (are depleted when used). Technological and structural developments keep shifting the ground for such empirical criteria, and technically and economically excludable resources may well be considered commons from the ethical perspective of ecological justice.

The degradation and depletion of commons through over-use has been the topic of the ‘tragedy’ discourse that followed from the influential article by Garrett Hardin (1968). The tragedy of “The tragedy of the commons” is that it has been taken as a demonstration of the inability of ‘common property’ regimes to manage commons, even though Hardin did, in effect, not consider such regimes (McCay and Jentoft 1998). Hardin’s case was a case of free usage and no regulation, and the only alternative regimes that were fostered by the ‘tragedy’ discourse were the privatisation and nationalisation of commons, and thereby this discourse effectively disguised the potential of ‘commons regimes’ to manage commons.

The concepts of commons and ecological justice can be put into practice in different ways that can be seen as commons regimes, which institutionalise the usage of common environments. Examples are sustainable production methods, local community institutions of co-management and cooperative food networks; certification and labels that involve the consumers as a responsible actor; state or supra-state regulations of the market; and global institutions under the mantle of the United Nations. Organic agriculture has little direct influence on the latter, but it can play a key role in the first. It can do this in two different ways, through certified and non-certified organic agriculture.

There is a tendency in today’s globalised markets towards liberating the products from the production processes and manufacturing alternative, attractive, but fictive, stories to go with the product. Organic and fair trade certification are two examples of alternative forms of trade that go some way towards meeting the aims of ecological justice by way of incorporating the production process context into the market based on certification standards and procedures - standards that may be targeted to work against commodification and externalisation of costs. Such alternative forms of trade have the potential to work across globalised food networks in distant trade relations. But the current forms of organic and fair trade fall short of meeting the aims in some respect. Fair trade is lacking in ecological considerations, organic trade lacks social considerations, and both omit considerations of external costs connected to distant trade, for instance. In general, the different forms of alternative trade put the responsibility for ecological justice on the consumer, and the question is to what degree the consumers can bear such responsibility in a situation of cheap conventional goods that do not carry their own environmental and social costs, and under the pressure of everyday economic constraints.

The organic movement also works to promote alternative forms of farming and food networks that are not necessarily certified in the standard market way (e.g. local community networks, local markets, and participatory guarantee systems). The concept of ‘non-certified organic agriculture’ designates forms of production and processing that accord with the ideas and principles of organic agriculture without being certified. This form of organic agriculture has a potentially very important role to play in the promotion of ecological justice in large parts of the low-income countries, where food production is based on low-yielding agriculture, subsistence farming, and local food markets. In such areas, organic production methods have the potential to give higher and more stable yields than the existing agriculture, based only on local natural resources and the necessary inputs of knowledge and extension services to assist the establishing of self-reliable organic food systems. Non-certified organic agriculture may therefore be promoted as an alternative solution to food security problems, which is more sustainable and ecologically just than the mainstream high-input solutions. A solution that is furthermore open to the later inclusion of certified organic trade as an added option for economic development. But this solution can only be realized fully if there is understanding of and support for the value of sustainable low external input agriculture, such as organic agriculture, within development organizations and related research institutes.

Conclusions

Ecological justice is a more comprehensive form of justice than the well-known form of political liberalism, extended to incorporate the idea that individuals have a claim on their environment and the idea that justice and fairness concern not only humans, but animals and other living organisms as well. The idea that we share environments is basic to ecological justice. Alternative forms of trade such as organic and fair trade constitute one way to implement ecological justice in agriculture and food systems. But both organic and fair trade, in their current forms, need to be amended from the perspective of ecological justice, and such alternative forms of trade put great demands on the awareness and responsibility of the consumers. In addition to such reforms of the market based food systems, ecological justice suggests the promotion of 'non-certified organic agriculture' as a path to development of local sustainable communities.

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