

Deconstructing the organic movement

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ABSTRACT

Organic agriculture has sought to establish its scientific validity and its origins. Conford (2001) claims that these can be traced to the 1920s, and that Anglican Christianity is pivotal to its history. However, organic agriculture takes many forms and the role of religion in society has changed. In the UK, a new incarnation of organic farming occurred in the late twentieth century as part of a wider response to environmental issues.

Keywords: organic farming; history; religion; holism; organic growers, OGA

INTRODUCTION

Increased organic sales, with growth rates up to 40% per year in the UK, have been paralleled by developments in the organic farming discourse. In order to both to understand the past and to formulate strategies for the future, it is important to debate the history and origins of the organic movement.

Proponents of organic agriculture have sought to establish its scientific validity and to promote its claims to benefit health and the environment. There has also been an attempt to establish its wider credentials by elaborating the movement's history and origins. The work of Conford (2001) is foremost here. He aims to demonstrate that although organic farming is widely perceived to be a recent development it has deep philosophical roots that can be traced to the 1920s. He also argues that the organic movement developed within an Anglican context, and that it has a central concept of a 'natural order', which derives from Christian theology.

ISSUES

One organic movement, or many?

Although Conford (2001) acknowledges the influence of Steiner, other Europeans, and the importance of Howard and McCarrison's work in India, his history is primarily of the English organic movement and the Soil Association. But organic farming has followed other routes and taken other names. See, for example, Merril (1983) who has identified 16 variations on the theme or the list of sustainable farming methods on the Ecology Action website (www.growbiointensive.org).

Religion and holism

Many of the early organicists were Anglican Christians, as indeed were most people in pre-war England. Subsequently there has been a decline in orthodox religious belief resulting from urbanization, cultural pluralism and the spread of scientific thought. In particular, the 1960s Cultural Revolution marked a mass shift in social attitudes and an increasing interest in Eastern religions, ecology and holism.

Holism, “a *method of thought founded on the principle of an organic whole*” is central to organic farming first enunciated by Von Goethe (1749 - 1832). Although not well received in his own lifetime it was revived and developed by Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, who applied it to agriculture. The differences between Anthroposophy, the science of the occult, and Anglican Christianity would be hard to overstate.

A REASSESSMENT OF THE UK ORGANIC MOVEMENT

Key organic farming ideas have a long history, but a deconstruction of the movement suggests that late twentieth century socio-demographic developments produced a new movement with distinctly different social characteristics. The post war agricultural revolution almost swept away the old organic farming movement. It was the response to intensive chemical methods and the new environmentalism that revitalised debates about food and farming. Ex-urbanite organic growers played a crucial role. They set up the Organic Growers Association (OGA) in 1981 and initiated the highly successful Cirencester conferences. The group arranged farm walks and practical workshops. They also established a dedicated packaging company and launched a newsletter, later to become *Organic Farming*.

In contrast to the pre-war movement that opposed farm mechanisation, the new organic growers embraced technological advances in mechanised weed control and developed intermediate technologies such as protected cropping systems. The founders of the OGA were, by and large, new to any kind of farming and, in many cases, new to the countryside, but a review of contemporary articles in the OGA Newsletter shows that they were determined to introduce new initiatives even if it meant upsetting traditionalists. While the origins of the Soil Association can be traced to the Kinship in Husbandry movement, the present strength of the market for organic food and the vitality of the organic movement owes more to the widespread reaction to intensive farming than to pre-war Anglican and ruralist ideologies.

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