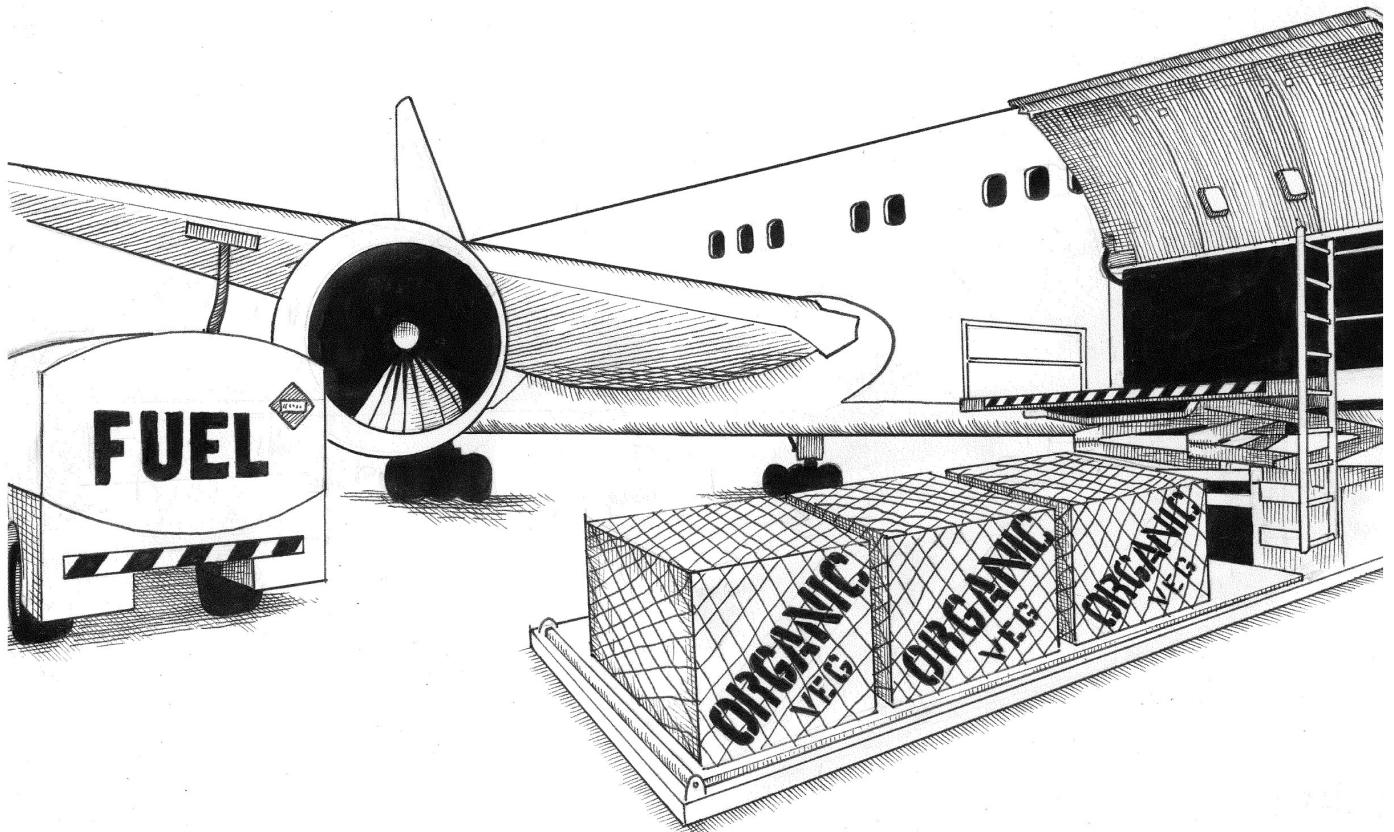


EATING UP THE ALTERNATIVES



PART TWO:

CORPORATE ORGANICS

Corporate Watch 2011

Eating up the Alternatives

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Corporate Watch 2011

contents

- 1 — Introduction
- 1 — What is 'organic' food?
- 2 — Key elements of organic integrity
- 2 — From 'back to the land' to corporate organic
- 4 — Organic in the US
- 4 — Industrial organic
- 4 — Consolidation of US organic production
- 6 — Corporate control of organic
- 7 — Why do they sell out?
- 7 — What's in it for the big corporations? (apart from the money, of course)
- 9 — Case Study – Whole Foods Market
- 10 — A history of slipping organic standards in the US
- 11 — Organics in the UK
- 11 — Organic farming in the UK – vital statistics
- 12 — Supermarket organic
- 13 — Global sourcing
- 15 — Possible solutions to the problem of corporate organics?
- 16 — Conclusion
- 17 — Notes

Written by Lorna Stephenson and Kathryn Tulip

Edited by Tom Anderson, Hannah Schling and Beth Lawrence

Illustrations by Jon Sack

Layout by Don Atherton using Scribus – open source desktop publishing

Corporate Watch

Corporate Watch is an independent not-for-profit research and alternative media group, founded in 1996. It aims to investigate the social and environmental impact of transnational corporations and the mechanisms by which corporations accumulate and maintain power. Corporate Watch runs an alternative news service as well as research projects on supermarkets, privatised services, migration, genetic modification, nanotechnology, extractive industries, climate change, Palestine, banking, the Olympics, corporate power, and the public relations industry.

www.corporatewatch.org.uk

introduction

*“Food system sustainability needs to be seen as much more than a set of ecological standards easily met by discerning consumers: it is a fundamentally political project with obligatory cultural, social and ideological dimensions.”*¹ – From Johnston, Biro & MacKendrick, “Lost in the Supermarket: The Corporate-Organic foodscape and the struggle for food democracy”

There has been a massive surge in the popularity of organic food in the last two decades. With this, the organic industry has been transformed from marginal and niche to mainstream, with organic products standing side by side with conventional versions on most supermarket shelves. The meaning of 'organic' has itself changed correspondingly. For many consumers, organic has become simply a more expensive option, a price premium justified for the sake of a 'purer' vegetable or piece of meat, untouched by chemical pesticides, preservatives or antibiotics.

But this is far from the founding principles of organic farming. The organic belief system encompasses a range of issues designed to create an alternative way of producing and consuming food that benefits not only the environment and human health, but encourages a deeper understanding of the social and ethical aspects of food production. Had organic beliefs hit the mainstream in their purest form, the foundation for an ethical food revolution may have been set – the fact that they were instead watered down was a result of the corporate co-option of the organic movement.

what is 'organic' food?

The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) outlines the principles of organic agriculture - as shown in the box below. These show that the ecological side is just one aspect of the organic belief system. Health is another principle, which not only relates to human health, but also the health of the planet, the animal world and the soil itself. Even more often overlooked is the emphasis on fairness and care, which deals with the relations involved in production. “Fairtrade”, which has become a movement in its own right, is actually intrinsic to organic agriculture. A useful term that encompasses the social and ethical aspects relating to control embedded within the principles of organic agriculture is “food democracy”. At its core is “the idea that people can and should be actively participating in shaping the food system, rather than remaining passive spectators...[it] is about citizens having the power to determine agro-food policies and practices locally, regionally, nationally and globally.”²

International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) principles of organic agriculture:

Principle of health – Organic agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible.

Principle of ecology – Organic agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.

Principle of fairness – Organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities

Principle of care – Organic agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.³

Key elements of organic integrity ⁴

Although conceptions of organic principles vary widely, one useful and more thorough framework is found in Michael Sligh's article, *Organic at a Crossroads: The Past and the Future of the Organic Movement*.

Environmental Stewardship – Production and processing systems that promote and enhance biodiversity and ecological balance. Organic integrity will not survive if it supports expedient practices that in the long run damage the environment. Proper stewardship requires the development of high standards of welfare for animals, sustainable energy use (including in production, shipping and processing) and confronting the pollution of genetic engineering and the patenting of biological processes and their impacts on organic agriculture and the ecosystem.

Accountability – The lifeblood of organic is grass-roots, consumer-based confidence in and demand for safe foods that are produced using environmentally sound, humane and socially just practices. These are based on public openness, honesty and direct consumer access. Organic integrity also requires accountability to local communities for the impacts of our organic production and processing on local regional and international economies. Organic integrity embraces the promotion of fair trade practices which support local food systems, family farms, food security and non-governmental participation. Organic integrity cannot survive through allowing organic colonialism or any other practices perpetuating historically unjust relationships between the global North and South.

Fair Price Systems – Fair pricing is essential for the survival of organic integrity. It must be fair for all stakeholders in the system: farmers, labourers, processors, retailers and consumers. A fair relationship between the costs of production, the price the consumer pays and the profit taken along the way must be maintained. If the organic approach becomes solely a predatory pricing system emulating historical agribusiness practices we will have lost organic integrity.

A Model for an Alternative System – Organics set out to combine environmental stewardship, accountability, and fairness into an alternative model combined with the enlightened labour standards that set the mark which other food systems strive for. It did not set out to establish expensive niche market foods for rich people, but to model an alternative for all.

from 'back to the land' to corporate organic

As these definitions show, 'organic' is much more than the present mainstream conception of a set of standards governing farming inputs. The process of mapping how this divergence occurred is also to tell the story of the organic movement. Organic farming has its roots in the early part of the 20th century, and was kept alive, despite the increasing industrialisation of agriculture after the Second World War, mainly by a dedicated group of people, many of whom were from traditional farming backgrounds. It was the response to intensive chemical methods, highlighted by the work of Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, which helped to create the new environmentalism that revitalised debates about food and farming.

In the 1960s and 70s there was a new generation of converts to organic farming (the hippy 'back to the landers'), some pooling their resources to create self-sufficient rural communes, others creating small privately-owned farms. In urban areas a range of alternative food distribution networks, including food co-operatives and retail stores, which linked local organic producers to consumers began to evolve. Many of the rural projects failed and people went back to the cities, but those that survived went on to create the backbone of the current organic farming movement. In contrast to the pre-Second World War movement which opposed farm mechanisation, the new

organic growers have embraced technological advances including mechanised weed control and protected cropping systems.

Despite the increased development of a capitalist agribusiness model since the 1970s, there has been parallel slow and steady growth of a movement for organic and local food. This growth was supported by the development of a global movement of environmentalists who had an interest in supporting organic farming and eating organic food. They have been joined more recently by consumers concerned about food safety; the proposed introduction of GM foods and various food scares – salmonella, BSE and dioxins – which have persuaded more and more people to buy organic.

Direct marketing methods, such as box schemes, farmers markets and farm shops, have in many cases succeeded in fostering direct relationships of trust between organic producers and consumers – and contain in them the possibility to challenge conventional agriculture and the agribusiness-controlled food system through a commitment to 'local food for local markets'.

However, these schemes make up only a small proportion of the organic industry, which has grown rapidly in the last 15 years. While the environmental benefits of mass conversion of land cannot be denied – millions of hectares of land that were once sprayed with pesticides and chemical fertilisers are now being farmed in a more ecological way – profound changes have accompanied this rapid expansion. The most important of these changes is the incorporation of organic food production into the conventional industrialised food system and the involvement of big food corporations and supermarkets throughout the production, processing and distribution of organic food.

Is the mainstreaming of organic food and its co-option by corporate interests damaging the wider interests the organic movement set out to defend: the environment, animal welfare, the livelihoods of small organic farmers and farmworkers, and the production of food for local communities?

The US is much further down the line than the UK, with a greater concentration of organic production in the hands of big agribusiness. Critics say that the production practices of this industrial scale organic farming, whilst in keeping with the letter of US organic regulations, are not in keeping with the principles of the organic movement.⁵ In the UK, whilst organic farms are getting bigger⁶, most still tend to be farmed by people who have a holistic approach to organic farming, rather than the rule-based approach (where inorganic inputs are simply replaced by organic ones) favoured by industrial-scale organic farms in the US. This is arguably in part because UK organic farming regulations are stronger than those in the US. But when organic food leaves the UK farm, the route that it takes to the consumer is starting to look more and more like the processing/distribution model of the conventional food sector.

As organic becomes incorporated into the conventional food system, it becomes more processed, packaged and transported – and therefore much less sustainable. The organic sector is looking more and more like the conventional food sector not only in inputs (use of off-farm compost and fertilisers) and production methods (feedlots and monocultures), but particularly at the processing and distribution end of the supply chain. There is a growing convergence between the supply networks of the organic and conventional food sectors. The geographic reach of the sector is greater - no longer is it 'local food for local markets'. Now organic produce is distributed through supermarket 'just in time' delivery systems to all parts of the country, and relies on imports of exotic and out of season organic produce.

Concentration and monopolisation in the conventional food industry has created a handful of giant corporations with such enormous buying power that they are able to set prices, and control market access. They have also accelerated loss of genetic diversity, increased packaging and food miles and damage to local economies. Similar effects can be seen as the organic market becomes more concentrated.

we will now examine the state of organics in the USA before comparing it to the situation in the UK.

organic in the US

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 2008 Organic Survey showed the scale of organic production in the US. 14,540 organic farms operated in the US, and owned 4,077,337 acres of farmland used in organic production that year.⁷ In 2007, the organic food industry was worth £15 billion a year.⁸ Market reports by analysts, Market Publishers, found that the organic food market in the US has been one of the fastest growing agricultural industries, with the average annual growth between 2000-2008 ranging between 16%-21%. Furthermore, it fared well during the economic slow-down, with continued growth into 2009, which exceeded that year's total food sales growth.⁹

industrial organic

The most striking departure of US organic farming from its roots, in terms of the methods of production, is the move from small-scale farms to the massive industrialised farms typical of the conventional agriculture business.

The industrial model of conventional agriculture

Over the past 50 years, industrialisation has transformed agriculture so that it now more closely resembles a manufacturing industry: the creation of larger farms, a reliance on inputs manufactured off the farm (fertiliser, pesticides etc), the mechanisation of production methods and the displacement of labour by capital (machinery and other technological inputs). The effects of this industrialisation and the related intensification of farming have led to increasing concern over the environmental, animal welfare, food safety, health and socio-economic impacts of conventional farming. Industrialisation also means that much of the value generated by agriculture has moved away from farmers and flows instead into the hands of food corporations. Between 1910 and 1990, the share of the agricultural economy received by US farmers dropped from 21% to 5%, the gains being taken up by agribusiness corporations.¹⁰

consolidation of US organic production

*"Organic is becoming what we hoped it would be an alternative to."*¹¹ – Consumer advocate Roger Blobaum, quoted in Michael Pollan's 'Naturally'

Organic farming methods were developed originally in response to concerns about the adverse impacts of conventional farming, yet organic is itself now being appropriated by corporations and transformed into an industrialised food system, albeit organic.¹²

As with conventional produce, California produces most of the organic fresh fruit and vegetables grown in the US.¹³ The entry of big food corporations into organic agriculture in California has changed the face of US organic farming. These corporate organic farms have embraced the 'logic' of capitalism - and essentially mirror the conventional industrial agriculture system - with bigger, more mechanised farms and more specialised production. This often includes monoculture cropping of just a few high value crops, e.g. farms growing thousands of hectares of the same crop (monocropping is permitted under US organic regulations).¹⁴ Encouraging biodiversity is an integral part of organic environmental stewardship – and its loss in industrialised farming methods is just one way the ecological integrity of organic production is

being diminished.

Another ecological effect of the concentration of production has been the need to transport goods further. The dramatic increase in production of organic food in California has meant the produce has to be distributed more widely. This usually means some technological process must be undertaken to preserve the produce, hence the development of 'pillow packs' for salad leaves and the ultra-pasteurisation of organic milk so that these products can be shipped throughout the US (and the rest of the world in the case of salad) with the associated energy costs. As organic has become big business, its fossil fuel consumption, as a result of shipping products around the globe and the amount of associated packaging waste, have become indistinguishable from the conventional food system. Environmental journalist Michael Pollan says that growing, processing and shipping the equivalent of one calorie of rocket from the West to the East coast of the US costs 57 calories of fossil fuel.¹⁵

Large-scale production also demonstrates a disregard for the organic movement's emphasis on fair price systems. Corporate concentration in the conventional food industry has created a handful of giant corporations with such enormous market power that they're able to set the prices paid by consumers, limit farmers' returns and control market access. Mirroring this trend, the entry of big food corporations into US organic agriculture has resulted in the concentration of organic production into the hands of just a few large corporations.¹⁶ For example, a study conducted in 2002 found that two percent of organic farms in California, about 27 growers bringing in over \$1 million a year, represented over half of the organic produce sales in the state.¹⁷ Today five giant farms, including Tanimura and Antle and Cal-Organic (owned by Grimeway Farms), control over 50% of the \$400 million organic fruit and vegetable market in California.¹⁸ This consolidation of production into the hands of a few giant farms is crushing many of the small farmers for whom organic has represented a way out of the cheap food economics of the conventional farm sector. Many of the small farmers who pioneered organic agriculture are now struggling to compete against these larger players. As Michael Pollan laments, "the familiar, dismal history of American agriculture begins to repeat itself in the organic sector".¹⁹

The industrialisation of organic agriculture in California has split the US organic sector into two streams – the industrial and the local. One is large-scale and feeds the big supermarket chains, whilst the other is small-scale and sells direct to consumers, restaurants and independent stores. There is little room for mid-sized farms and food businesses in this new organic landscape. A phenomenon known as the 'shrinking middle' is being observed in the US organic farming sector. This is also apparent in conventional farming: farms too small to provide the quantities and year round availability demanded by the big processors and supermarkets, but too big and too specialised to make direct selling practicable are disappearing.²⁰ Mid-sized organic farms are being squeezed out by bigger farms converting to organic, which are better able to supply the supermarkets.²¹

Larger farms following this industrialised model are also more likely to become vertically integrated, i.e. bought up by larger companies who own other parts of the supply chain, and to set up global contracting networks, thereby further increasing their control over the organic supply chain. This lessens the direct accountability between producer and consumer that is also a key element of the organic belief system. Earthbound Farms, which specialises in bagged organic salad mix, is now a vertically integrated "seed to salad" operation which contracts with over 150 growers in several US states and Mexico. Within a year of US dairy corporation Dean Foods acquiring the Silk brand of organic soya milk in 2002, it began importing soya from Brazil, Argentina and China.²² Contract supply from around the world benefits large corporations, as they can take advantage of climatic variation and be assured of year round production and supply. Contract growing also transfers the risks of variable crop yield, due to weather, pests etc, away from the corporation and onto the contracted growers. The requirement to enter into contracts to supply a particular quantity of produce at a fixed price means the grower assumes the risks of both over- and under-production. As an indicator of the amount of organic produce

imported into the US, more than 40 percent of the US government's organic certifiers are based outside the United States. ²³

corporate control of organic

Along with the dramatic changes in methods of production, there has been a similar transformation in terms of ownership of organic producers.

To grab a piece of the action in the organic market, big food corporations have either been buying up small pioneer organic food companies or investing in the production of organic versions of their top brands. The big supermarkets have also developed own brand organics. Where once it was made up of small and medium sized processors, wholesalers and retailers, the organic food industry is starting to follow in the footsteps of the conventional food industry. The food processors and retailers are growing in size and their number is shrinking, and a few large corporations (e.g. US dairy processor Dean Foods, and Hain-Celestial, the world's largest natural products and organic processor, ²⁴ and whole food and organic retailer Whole Foods Market) are starting to take control of their respective sectors.

Even low-price behemoth WalMart launched an organic campaign in 2006, doubling the number of organic lines it carried and promising to make organics more affordable with what its executives called "the WalMart price". ²⁵ It was soon dogged by criticism over misleading customers with its store displays and bending standards. Randy Lee, CFO of PCC Natural Markets, the US' largest organic co-op, said of Wal-Mart at the time: "A huge amount of work went into coming up with a standard of quality in the organic industry. If these allegations are true, then it very easily erodes those standards and comes with a significant business impact on other retailers that have higher standards". ²⁶

Corporate acquisitions of originally independent organic brands peaked in 1999, and have slowed since then. ²⁷ According to Phil Howard, author of 'Who Owns Organic': "The reason for the slowdown is that there are very few organic companies of significant size left to purchase." ²⁸ Of these buyouts, the most well known in the UK are Rachel's Organic dairy, now owned by the largest US dairy corporation Dean Foods, and Green and Blacks organic chocolate bought by Cadbury Schweppes (who are now owned by American agribusiness giant Kraft). For more information on which corporations own and control organic in North America see Phil Howard's website. ²⁹

Who owns who? Examples of corporate takeovers of organic producers:	
Cadbury Schweppes	Green and Blacks
Nestle	Tribe Mediterranean Foods
General Mills	Cascadian Farms
Coca Cola	Odwalla
Pepsi	Naked Juice
M&M Mars	Seeds of Change
Danone	Stonyfield Farms
Grimmway	Cal-Organic
Tanimura and Antle	Natural Selection Foods/ Earthbound
Lion Capital	Kettle Foods

Many of these buy-outs make a mockery of the principles of accountability and consumer confidence in organic brands. For example, Groupe Danone has an 80% share of US organic yoghurt producers Stonyfield Farm. Although Stonyfield Farm spokes people claim they maintain their standards and autonomy over the company, the need to answer to Danone's shareholders is recognised as the paramount objective – not to mention the parent company's less-than-perfect ethical past. Danone has been criticised a number of times for its poor business practices, including being sued successfully for fraudulent advertising claims regarding its Actimel yoghurt; an allegation in a British Medical Journal report in 2003 that Danone, amongst others, had violated international codes on baby milk promotion in Africa; and featuring in a Polaris Institute report about the dark side of the bottled water industry.^{30 31 32}

Gary Hirschberg, Stonyfield's President and CEO, proudly proclaims on the Stonyfield Farm milk carton that "organic dairy farmers are our heroes" and their website states that "Paying farmers a fair price for their products is an important tenet for many involved in organic agriculture". But those small US dairy farmers who supply Stonyfield say they are being squeezed by the company, that it is not paying a fair price for their milk, and that consequently they are in danger of going out of business.³³

why do they sell out?

Some of the pioneers who have sold out believe they can change the food system from the inside, that by taking advantage of corporate capital and know-how they can expand more quickly, and thrust organic food into the mainstream. Some have gone on to take well paid executive positions in the big corporates, for others it's been the chance to cash in, take some of the profits out of their business and retire.

Gene Kahn, originally a hippy 'back-to-the-lander' and pioneer of the US organic movement, says he was forced to sell out when he was stung by the 'Alar scare' (a pesticide suspected of being a carcinogen). The scare made many consumers turn to organic produce, but when the scare subsided, many went back to buying conventional produce and organic supply began to outstrip demand. Kahn, who had borrowed heavily to expand production, was forced to sell a majority share in Cascadian Farm, his original farming business, to US food company, Welch's. Together with Welch's he created an organic company, Small Planet Foods, which was subsequently bought by General Mills, the third biggest food corporation in the US. Kahn is now a vice president and the Global Sustainability Officer for General Mills, and Small Planet Foods is busy making microwaveable organic ready-meals. He claims that unless organic "scales up" it will "never be anything more than yuppie food".³⁴

Sarah Huntington, one of Cascadian Farm's longest standing employees, sees the tensions within industrial organic and says the system is constantly pushing you back toward monoculture, which is anathema in organic. But that's the challenge – "to change the system more than it changes you."³⁵

Gary Hirschberg, founder and CEO of Stonyfield Farms, takes a more 'pragmatic' approach, stating: "Our kids don't have time for us to sit on our high horses and say we're not going to do this because it's not ecologically perfect...The only way to influence the powerful forces in this industry is to become a powerful force."³⁶

what's in it for the big corporations? (apart from the money, of course)

Buying up small organic food companies means that big corporations can directly buy into, not only the profits of the organic food market, but also into the country cottage image of organic and the ethical/environmental values of these pioneer companies, giving them instant corporate social responsibility (CSR) brownie points. Since it costs millions to launch a new brand,

acquiring an established name is far less risky than starting a competitor.

Many of the acquisitions are, as Pollan points out, part of company-wide "health initiatives", along with adding calcium to various product lines and developing "functional foods".³⁷ The big corporations want to expand the market for organic, beyond those who already buy organic because it is good for the planet, into the much larger health market. In the eyes of General Mills (and the other big corporations), organic is not so much a revolution as a market niche.³⁸ The relationships between the giant food corporations and their organic subsidiaries are not usually apparent from looking at the labels of products on the supermarket shelves. According to the public relations industry's own journal, PR Week, big companies buy organic brands for the loyalty that comes with an established name. But linking the organic brand to a large company could threaten the very image that big corporates seek, and so these affiliations are often not mentioned as part of the organic brands' communications strategy.³⁹



Case Study – Whole Foods Market

From one alternative wholefood store in Austin, Texas, Whole Foods Market has grown through a series of acquisitions and mergers to become the largest natural food supermarket, with more than 300 stores in North America and the UK. ⁴⁰ The company won a legal battle in 2007 with the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the US competition watchdog, over its planned merger with its biggest rival Wild Oats. The FTC tried to block the merger arguing that consumer choice in the natural and organic sector would be undermined if the deal went through. ⁴¹

In his book, *The Omnivores Dilemma*, which examines the food industry by dissecting four meals obtained from four very different food systems, Michael Pollan chose to shop in his local Whole Foods Market store to buy his 'Big Organic' meal. Pollan says the meal featured an 'organic' chicken which, despite a 'free-range' label, shared a shed with twenty thousand other birds. Whilst, theoretically, there is access to a patch of grass, the doors are kept shut until the birds are five or six weeks old, and two weeks later the "free range" chicken is on sale in the store. As Michael Pollan says, "the trickiest contradiction Whole Foods attempts to reconcile is the one between industrialisation of the organic food system of which it is part and the pastoral ideals on which that industry has been built". ⁴² Pollan says the wordy labels, artful photographs and glossy brochures are part of a literary genre he calls "supermarket pastoral" in which the marketing consultants or "grocery store poets", do everything they can to encourage us in our willing suspension of disbelief about the reality of organic food production.

Despite its humble beginnings, Whole Foods Market is no longer creating an alternative vision of the food system. It has bought into the industrial agribusiness model and has, on founder and CEO John Mackey's own admission, played an important part in the industrialisation of organic food production in the US. ⁴³ The company says that it supports local, organic and sustainable farming and the walls of the stores have huge photographs and quotes from 'local' farmers. Whilst these profiles may be heart-warming, they also artfully mislead customers about what they are really being sold. The reality is that in the US, Whole Foods uses the same kind of regional distribution system as the big supermarkets, and, like conventional supermarkets, has found it easier and more profitable to buy from just a few big farms. This kind of distribution system actively undermines small local suppliers: they can't produce the volumes of food required for regional or national distribution, or are too far away from the distribution centres for it to make economic sense to deliver a small amount of produce to them. As a consequence, much, though Whole Foods won't say how much, is shipped to its stores across the US from big Californian producers, like Earthbound Farms and Cal-Organic.⁴⁴ John Mackey insists that Whole Foods buys some of its fresh produce locally to its US stores. Whilst distances are much greater in the US, Whole Foods' definition of 'locally grown' as "only produce that has travelled less than a day (7 or fewer hours by car or truck) from the farm" is stretching the idea of what local means. ⁴⁵

John Mackey is a great admirer of Wal-Mart, stating: "What a great, great company! Wal-Mart has single handedly driven down retail prices across America". This is a Wal-Mart policy which has put many small retailers and suppliers out of business. ⁴⁶ He also approves of Wal-Mart's policy of "crushing the parasitical unions". ⁴⁷ Despite being in Fortune's '100 Best Companies to Work For in America', Whole Foods Market is as anti union as Wal-Mart, and has been criticised for firing two workers, who were involved in unionising the Madison, Wisconsin store, over a minor issue. ⁴⁸ As for its track record with respect to its suppliers, Whole Foods stores in the US stock tomatoes from one of the most notorious Florida sweatshop producers and has ignored an appeal from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a group of migrant workers, to pay an extra penny a pound for these tomatoes. ⁴⁹ Mackey has also been accused of market rigging and fraud after he was exposed giving investment advice on a blog under a pseudonym, in which he talked up his own company and attacked its main competitor, Wild Oats. This was at the same time as Wild Oats was the subject of Whole Foods Market's takeover bid. ⁵⁰ We can observe, in this example, very similar predatory behaviour to that displayed by 'mainstream' corporations.

Despite the marketing hype of its mission statement, Wholefood's business practices and its expansion plans essentially mirror those of the conventional retail sector. Michael Pollan says of Whole Foods, "whilst growing the aragula (rocket) is organic, everything else is capitalist agribusiness as usual". ⁵¹

a history of slipping organic standards in the US

By the time the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) got around to producing a set of enforceable organic standards, corporations – whose entry into the organic market on a big scale relied on uniform standard in the first place – were able to influence the process. Through their formidable lobbying power the standards reflected the needs and desires of industrialised organic. This pattern was repeated each time the standards were brought up for debate, and each time has prompted strong public opposition.

- **1990** — the Organic Foods Production Act 1990 required the development of coherent national organic standards (previously standards were regional/state-wide). The Act mandated a committee of stakeholders, NOSB to advise the USDA in the development of a draft set of standards.
- **1997** — the USDA released draft organic regulations which allowed the use of GM crops, sewage sludge, antibiotics, slaughter by-products and irradiation in organic production. Over 300,000 public comments (a national record) were submitted to the USDA, almost all condemned the draft proposal. The proposal was withdrawn.
- **2002** — the US food industry's biggest players lobbied hard for and, in 2002, won a set of organic standards which favoured the industrialisation of organic. Big organic won the argument on important questions like: Is a factory farm organic? (Yes, it can be); Does a cow need pasture? (Yes, but there is no definition of how much); Can food additives and preservatives be used in organic processed food? (Yes). The US organic standards are 'scale neutral', there is nothing in the standards that legally limits farmers from operating dairies with thousands of cows, feedlots with thousands of beef cattle or growing monocultures of vegetables on thousands of acres.
- **2003** — in early 2003, there was an attempt to weaken the US standards, when a congressman from Georgia, acting for the benefit of a poultry company in his district, slipped a provision into a government spending bill to relax the requirement that organic feed be used to produce organic chicken. The provision stated that whenever the price of organic feed was twice as high as conventional feed, then conventional feed could be substituted, and the chickens could still be labelled organic, creating a dilemma about when an organic chicken is really organic. Following an outcry from the organic community, the US Congress overturned the loophole and reinstated the 100% organic feed requirement.⁵²
- **2005** — The Organic Trade Association, which represents the big US food corporations like Kraft, Dole, Wal-Mart and Dean Foods, assisted by the US Department of Agriculture, lobbied heavily to attach a rider to the 2006 US Agricultural Appropriations Bill that would weaken US organic food standards by allowing certain synthetic ingredients and processing aids to be used in the preparation, processing, and packaging of organic foods. The regulatory changes have also effectively taken away the National Organic Standards Board's traditional lead jurisdiction in setting US organic standards. Despite objections from organic activists the bill passed into law.

In 2010 the National Organic Program (NOP), a body that develops and administers organic standards in the US, fought back with what it dubbed the 'age of enforcement', during which loose definitions of rules such as 'access to pasture' were to be clarified, more detailed standards made for organic livestock and a stronger inspection process to be implemented.⁵³ The rules are said to 'reflect years of work to close loopholes exploited by so-called "organic" factory farms'.⁵⁴ The NOP also addressed several long-standing complaints made by the Cornucopia Institute (a campaigning organisation for small and family-scale farming) about violations of organic rules by industrial-scale organic dairies.⁵⁵

organics in the UK

The landscape of organic agriculture in the UK differs from the large-scale production seen in the US.

Most UK organic food comes from small producers, often working as co-operatives or through wholesalers in order to sell to supermarkets.⁵⁶ Like the US, though, there are two streams of production, one which emerged during the 'boom years' of organics, during which there was a widespread conversion to organic methods in order to meet consumer demand through multiple retailers such as supermarkets, and the other in which producers refused to scale up, preferring to maintain the direct link between producers and consumers. It is the former which prompted headlines of supermarket exploitation of farmers throughout the 2000s and which signals the greatest departure from the organic belief system.

organic farming in the UK – vital statistics

According to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the total area of registered organic and in-conversion land in the UK in January 2009 (the most recent figures) was 738,709ha. Of this, 119,441ha were in conversion and 619,268ha were fully organic.⁵⁷ This represents only 4.2% of the total agricultural land production in the UK. The organic land area in the UK has increased over 12-fold (from 60 thousand to nearly 740 thousand hectares) between 1997-2009.

Before the recession hit in 2009, the market for organic produce had experienced massive growth. According to the Soil Association, the UK's biggest organic certification organisation, sales of organic food and drink in the UK increased more than 18-fold in the twelve years leading up to 2006 – from £105 million (1993-4) to £1.9 billion (2006).⁵⁸ Despite this high growth rate, organic products still only represented about 2% of the total value of food and non-alcoholic drink sales in the UK in 2006.⁵⁹ The number of consumers purchasing organic foods peaked between 1997 and 2000 (as GM foods hit the headlines), with growth rates of up to 55% per year. The Soil Association says that the growth rate in 2006 was down to 22%, and that on average the market has grown by 27% each year over the past decade.⁶⁰ The number of registered organic producers was just 828 in 1996/97, by 2009 it was 4946.⁶¹ The fact that land area in organic production has grown significantly more than the number of producers suggests that organic farms have not only grown in number but existing farms are also getting bigger.

The UK organic market initially developed around primary produce like fruit and vegetables, but according to market researchers, Keynote, other organic produce sectors are now growing, including meat and fish, cereals and baked goods and multi-ingredient products (convenience foods).⁶² This change in focus from basic fresh UK grown produce to more complex processed and imported products, is reflected in the increasing numbers of registered food processors and importers. These grew from 264 in 1996/7 to 2,404 in 2007,⁶³ an eight-fold increase over the ten year period, and linked to the increasing involvement of the big supermarkets in the organic sector.

The latest organic market report from the Soil Association shows that the economic downturn has affected the organic sector. In 2009, sales of organic products in this country were worth £1.84 billion, a decrease of 12.8% compared to 2008. Dairy sales fell by 5.5%, produce by 14.8% and fresh meat by 22.7% in 2009.⁶⁴ The bigger decreases in produce and fresh meat contributed to the greater price difference between organic and non-organic versions of these products, which are therefore more likely to be passed over as consumers try to curb their spending. The report predicted a return to growth in the sector, with a market expansion of 2-5 percent.⁶⁵ Rates of decline slowed in the first two months of 2010 for all categories of organic products.⁶⁶

As the demand for organics in this country grew in the late 1990s and early 2000s, supermarkets identified organic food as a premium-priced, highly-profitable market and were quick to jump on the bandwagon. The bigger market for organic produce meant many farmers quickly switched to organic production, and many large farms began producing organic alongside their conventional produce. The supermarkets introduced organic ranges, many under their own-labels. Now, like the conventional food sector, the majority (just under three-quarters) of organic food is sold in supermarkets. Independent shops and smaller multiples have a 14.5% share and direct sales (mail order, farm shops, box schemes, farmers markets) account for the remainder.⁶⁷

Retail sales of organic products through organic box and mail order schemes and other direct routes increased from £95 million in 2005 to £146 million in 2006 - a staggering 53 per cent growth, more than double that experienced by the major supermarkets.⁶⁸ The number of direct sales outlets for organic food have increased significantly, for example in 1999 there were only 30 farmers' markets, in 2005 there were over 500.⁶⁹ However, the recession has affected non-multiple retailers more than multiple retail outlets. Non-multiple retail outlets include box schemes, mail order, farm and health food shops, farmers markets and catering establishments. These retailers saw an average 14.9% drop in sales to £483 million, accounting for 26.3% of the organic market.⁷⁰ Particularly hard-hit were farmers markets, with a 20% decrease in sales, and other independent retailers at 17.7%.⁷¹ In contrast, sales through multiple retailers fell by 12.2% on average, and the supermarkets with the biggest organic market shares – Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose – saw their combined organic sales fall by only 10%.

Supermarkets have the lion's share of the retail market for organic foods. With this concentration of power comes the ability to control prices and set quality standards and contract terms for their suppliers. And history is starting to repeat itself with UK organic farmers suffering at the hands of the big supermarkets in much the same way as their conventional counterparts have been doing for many years.⁷²

Organic farmers say that supermarkets sell their own-label organic food at an unrealistically subsidised price to capture market share and that prices paid to producers are being driven down below the cost of production.⁷³ As with their conventional counterparts, they say that supermarkets renege on agreements, refusing to take consignments unless they can halve the price as part of in-store promotions.⁷⁴ Suppliers have also been threatened with de-listing if they refuse to switch their production to supermarket own-label.⁷⁵ Patrick Holden, head of the Soil Association, said in 2006: "A significant number of small organic businesses have suffered from supermarkets switching suppliers or abandoning a brand in favour of their own label production. There is a tyranny about own label products that allows supermarkets to abuse small producers. Customers need to insist on branded products."⁷⁶

Organic farmers are also coming under pressure from the supermarkets to produce standardised products, and to fit into the distribution methods of the conventional food sector. In 2007, Patrick Holden and Prince Charles were both de-listed by Sainsbury's, for supplying 'below standard' produce. Holden argued that it was Sainsbury's packing requirements, including that he truck his carrots 250 miles across the country, that reduced their quality. It also fined Holden £3,380 plus VAT through his account manager for the fact they deemed his delivery of carrots under par.⁷⁷ This is not only a problem Holden has experienced – other farmers have also complained that supermarket's high cosmetic standards for fruit and vegetables means much of their produce is graded out.⁷⁸

The UK's biggest organic wholesaler, Organic Farm Foods, was one of the pioneers in selling to supermarkets. In their Ethical Shopping Guide 2010 they criticised the big retailers for their treatment of producers, given the power balance they hold in their favour. They suggest a public code of conduct covering issues such as contractual terms, de-listing and product pricing to

increase supermarket accountability.⁷⁹

'Just-in-time' food management also adds to the carbon footprint of supermarket organic. This form of delivery to superstores is designed to save on expensive storage facilities by delivering food as and when required. Refrigerated vans then do several trips to farms and back, collecting only a small part of the produce at once, and therefore travelling considerably more miles, often empty.⁸⁰

global sourcing

Another contentious issue has been the importing of organic produce by supermarkets. In 2002, surveys showed that 70% of organic food sold in supermarkets was imported, with Tesco the worst offender at 80%, whilst Waitrose fared much better at 15%.⁸¹ Defra formulated an Organic Action Plan in 2002, of which one point was to reduce such imports to 30% by 2010. The reasons behind this recommendation showed the supermarkets' disregard for pretty much all the principles of organic integrity. A consultancy document produced for Defra in 2003 highlighted the widespread importing of bacon, ham, beef and pork as particular areas of concern. The reasons these products were imported were found to be standards differences (for example, EU country regulations permitted non-organic weaners to be raised and sold as organic, which is not permitted in the UK), lower prices due to the exchange rate, lower cost production systems (including lower wages) and prices decreasing due to dumping.⁸²

Although the situation has much improved, a glance at the labelling of many fruit and vegetables on supermarket shelves shows much organic produce is still imported. There is organic broccoli from Spain, garlic from Argentina, walnuts from China, honey from Brazil and raisins from the USA. Although some estimates suggest that, in terms of carbon emissions, organic production offsets food miles if produce is shipped or road freighted – though not air freighted,⁸³ it still shows how far removed supermarket's understanding of organic is from the founding principles of accountability and localism. 'Offset' food miles, which may bring the carbon footprint of globally sourced organic produce in line with the status quo, do not exactly tackle the high carbon content of that 'status quo' or the need to radically reduce it.

The transportation of goods from far flung countries to our shelves by air freight is, however, an environmental disaster. The Soil Association compared the carbon footprint of an organic joint of beef travelling to a Tesco superstore in Waltham Cross from a producer in Chepstow, Wales with a joint travelling from Tesco suppliers in the Argentinian ranch Estancia Santa Elena. Whilst the former's journey resulted in 38.5g of carbon emissions, the latter clocked up 320.6g of carbon emissions.⁸⁴ With aviation fuel tax-free, it often makes financial sense to import, even by air, rather than use home suppliers.⁸⁵ The Soil Association attempted to address this in 2007. It conducted a two year consultation on the question of air freighting and considered removing its accreditation from air freighted produce. However, the outcome of the consultation was not to take such drastic action, partly because of the supposed importance of export markets and organic trade for many producers in the Global South.⁸⁶

However, this in itself is another bone of contention. The question remains as to whether organic farmers in other countries, particularly in the Global South, receive a fair price and working conditions when selling their goods. The situation had been picked up early in the organic boom, when it was reported that 'At the level of the producer, one finds that marginal organic farmers in the South are likely to be as dependent on exploitative middlemen, corporate buyers and volatile prices as conventional producers, unless they enter fairtrade networks'.⁸⁷

With corporatisation effectively emptying 'organic' of its meaning, Fairtrade emerged as a separate movement. The principles of fair trade had been integral to the organic belief system, to again quote Michael Sligh: "Organic integrity embraces the promotion of fair trade practices which support local food systems, family farms, food security and non-governmental

participation. Organic integrity cannot survive through allowing organic colonialism or other practices perpetuating historically unjust relationships between North and South.”⁸⁸

Corporations now place greater emphasis on demonstrating 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR), and many are now keen to publicise that they treat workers well and have a positive impact on the communities where they set up exporting businesses – for example, by providing foreign capital necessary to build schools or other infrastructure projects. This is particularly the case in areas where big food producers are a major employer and investor. However, many companies who champion their own corporate social responsibility, including organic ones, do not necessarily enter fair trade agreements. When they do not, it suggests they have a colonial mindset of investing in the type of infrastructure projects which benefit their CSR agenda, as and when they choose, rather than setting and paying a consistent and fair price directly to farmers to help build sustainable local economies. The neo-liberal free market does not encourage democratic and equitable relationships between buyers and producers but rather relies on inequality in order to profit.

The Soil Association has attempted to address this with its extra certification for Ethical Trade. Currently these standards are voluntary, but may become integrated into the Soil Association's organic stamp over time. They draw on the IFOAM's principle of fairness in organic production and stipulate that to meet the ethical trade standard, there must be “fair and ethical trading relationships, socially responsible practices, and fair and ethical employment: through the whole organic food chain, from the producer to the retailer, and in both developing and developed countries”.⁸⁹

While this at first appears to be a positive step, and to some extent a return to the organic principles of social justice and ethics, it also serves to obscure the question of control and the fundamental power imbalance which can, and should, be prominent in the debate over multinational corporate involvement in the Global South. The 'voluntary' aspect of the Ethical Trade certification portrays the sinister flip-side of corporate involvement. Why, one could ask, is it only 'voluntary' that there are fair and ethical trading relationships? Does this mean it is only 'voluntary' that workers in the Global South get decent wages and working conditions? With many of its members some of the biggest names in organic production and reliant on selling to supermarkets, it is perhaps not surprising that the Soil Association is not advancing the strongest possible alternative.

As the situation stands it is, of course, the power of corporations, and the profit motive that drives them, that supersedes the rights and well-being of those that work at the bottom of the production chain. The hierarchies of production relations in the South are naturalised within discourses of ethical trade, which frequently denote a paternal relationship with workers. In a 2009 study conducted by academics Josee Johnston, Andrew Biro and Norah MacKendrick, the website of organic chocolate manufacturers Dagoba was analysed, including the 'testimonials' section from cocoa farmers. These testimonials were found to “show the farm to be a relatively benevolent work environment, but simultaneously reveal deeply ingrained hierarchies and paternalism at odds with the ideals of food democracy.”⁹⁰

possible solutions to the problem of corporate organics?

The real answer to addressing the 'ethics' deficit, and general lack of social and ecological justice, in the food chain, organic or otherwise, is to challenge the assumptions surrounding ownership of production. Although international trade is dominated by large corporations with the capital to forge trade links and establish the necessary infrastructure, they are not irreplaceable. It is still possible for producers to sell their products directly.

An example of such democracy in action is the case of the Union of Indigenous Communities in the Isthmus Region (UCIRI).⁹¹ The UCIRI is an organisation formed in 1982, which brings together small coffee producers of several communities of the lower and middle high slopes of the Sierra Juarez mountain range, Mexico. The indigenous groups, which produce organic coffee, formed the UCIRI as a response to the unfair trading relationships with which they had previously been engaged. Without the means of their own to get their products to the market, the producers were left at the mercy of intermediaries who paid them very little for their produce.

The process of selling their coffee and other products directly was a long and difficult one. They were the first independent organisation to get an import and export licence in 1985. The union organises by consensus with delegates from each village representing their community at 'General Assemblies' on a rolling term basis. Now they are able to earn a much fairer price for their coffee and can conduct their business according to their own rules. By controlling their own production and marketing of goods, UCIRI have been able to establish a system where they not only get a fair price for their labour, but are able to invest in community based projects, which increases the quality of life for their members. UCIRI products are sold around the world.

Their website now proudly boasts:

*"The negotiation of trade deals, the monitoring of market prices, the preparation of invoices and right down to the accounting -- all of these processes we have realized together, acquiring new abilities and knowledge that we have then been able to pass on to our co-workers. Above all, we -- including all of our members -- have become aware of our own capacity as a socially strong, dedicated, and accomplished organization with the ability to continually develop stronger and stronger commercial relationships."*⁹²



conclusion

The drop in organic sales due to the recent recession has led the Soil Association and other actors involved in the organics movement to try to reignite people's interest in the movement by bringing it back to its ethical roots. While some producers have had to scale back or abandon their organic production when the supermarket orders dwindled, others have backed a nationwide campaign to promote organic in all its ethical entirety. As most farmers produce unbranded products, they need a generic campaign.⁹³ Andrew Wakely, from Organic Farm Food, told the Financial Times: "Ethics shouldn't just sit with the third world for Fairtrade; ethics should be in the UK, Spain, New Zealand, the US – places you can't get a Fairtrade accord... If we can link it to organic and benefit from the ethical message then we can re-ignite what organic stands for."⁹⁴

Although this acknowledges the ethics behind organic, it naturalises corporate control. The roots of the organic movement were an assertion that capitalist agribusiness is the problem, and the organic movement should be an alternative, not just a greener reincarnation.

The industrialisation of organic, and lobbying against thorough standards, shows that in many ways even the 'green' aspect is being curtailed – from enormous monoculture farms in the United States, to the road freight pollution produced by inefficient supermarket delivery systems and excessive 'food miles'. Time and time again, the fundamental antagonism between the profit motive of big business and the holistic organic approach has been exposed, and powerful corporations have come out on top.

Returning to the ideals of the organic pioneers, those hippy 'back to the landers', they seem to have all but disappeared in the corporate-organic foodscape. Historically the organic belief system was intended to challenge the alienation and exploitation of the industrial food system. There was as much emphasis on the ownership of production as there was on the use of pesticides. What has happened since has proved the ease with which threats can be absorbed into the corporate hegemony. Through processes, such as corporate acquisition of organic companies and the mass selling of 'organic' label goods through conventional, corporate-controlled avenues, organic has proved to be a lucrative endeavour for big business – which in turn has changed the very meaning of the term.

On the one hand, marketing tactics have talked up the health benefits of organic food to tap into the large healthy eating market. Advertising played on aspiration and quality in order to induce customers to part with their hard-earned cash in a way that helped turn organic into the antithesis of its original goal: an elitist consumer choice. On the other, discourses of producer empowerment, localism and pastoralism are adopted in order to remove the threat that the reality of corporate control could be exposed and challenged. Because the very principles of organic integrity that made organic popular were irreconcilable with corporate co-option, the new owners had to use marketing to water down and commodify what organic was supposed to stand for.

According to Johnston, Biro & MacKendrick, if the organic movement is to succeed "this collective re-thinking of the industrial food system can, and must, motivate a collective challenge to the neoliberal reliance on consumer choice as the optimal means of regulating how and what we eat."⁹⁵ The corporatisation of the organic movement demonstrates why this challenge is necessary. The concept of 'voting with your wallet' is flawed for several reasons. First, companies utilise carefully crafted PR to make it seem like their product is the 'ethical choice' when it often isn't. Second, it creates a false alternative: if the parent company is a big corporation, the choice can be a false one between buying their food – or buying their food. Even when the producer is not corporate-owned, as is the case with many supermarket suppliers in this country, their goods travel through the same conventional production and distribution chains. This means the same people always benefit. And it is not the farmers, but the corporations,

which cream off the profit.

Nevertheless, there is potential within the organic movement for a true alternative to re-emerge; and it involves instigating and supporting those food production projects which, radically, reject corporate involvement to instead operate with direct, decentralised and equitable ownership structures. Social and economic relationships within the food system can be unplugged from capitalist agribusiness, and be based instead on fairness, equality and security. Although you can't buy food democracy in Asda or Tesco, we can create and sustain a people-controlled, truly organic food system.

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