



After the 'Organic Industrial Complex': An ontological expedition through commercial organic agriculture in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

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This article uses the evolving understandings of commercial organic agriculture within two research programmes in New Zealand to address three problematic claims and associated framings that have underpinned analysis of the political economy of commercial organic agriculture. These three framings are: 1) that recent commercial developments in organic agriculture have become organised around a grand binary of large-scale, corporate, industrialised organic agriculture that is inhabited by pragmatic newcomers to the industry, against a small-scale, local, authentic remnant of the original organic social movement. This grand binary is most popularly recognisable in the claim by author Michael Pollan of the existence of an 'Organic Industrial Complex' that is slowly subsuming authentic organic agriculture. This relates to claim 2) that commercialisation creates inevitable pressures by which organic agriculture becomes 'conventionalised'. Finally, claim 3) positions organic agriculture alone as the only option for enabling improved environmental outcomes in agriculture. The *Greening Food* and ARGOS research programmes in New Zealand have studied the emergence of commercial forms of organic and other 'sustainable' agriculture in the period since 1995. A series of key engagements are highlighted in the unfolding history of these two programmes which demonstrate moments of transition in understandings of commercial organic, particularly in relation to situations of engagements between the research team and wider actors in the organic sector. These key engagements establish a clear sense in which the three major framings around the political economy of organic commercialisation could not explain the unfolding dynamics of the New Zealand organic sector. Rather, engagement with diverse actors enabled a whole new set of theoretical questions that opened up new areas of politics, contestation and elaboration of commercial forms of organic agriculture – particularly around shifts in power to the retail end of the agri-food chain, around new forms of agri-food governance, and around the politics of new audit systems. Within these shifts, the ontology of some of the researchers within these projects underwent parallel transformation. These transformative influences operated in two simultaneous directions. While the engaged research strategy of the two programmes clearly discomforted the researchers' underlying assumptions for framing the major trajectories of commercial organic development, the presence of the two research programmes also had an important enactive power in the sector by both rendering 'thinkable' particular trajectories and economic experiments and also by reinforcing a 'metric-centric' tendency in the evolution of global environmental audit systems. Seen in this light, these engagements open up new questions about the research programmes themselves in terms of the emerging politics of what Philip Lowe describes as a more 'enactive' rural sociology and help direct attention to an emerging 'ontological turn' in the practice and politics of research.

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1. Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* examines the contributions of iterative research strategies to both the study of sustainability, and the pursuit of relevant and valuable outcomes

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for the non-academic stakeholders in projects led by rural sociologists and geographers. The implications and challenges of this methodological approach were accentuated by Philip Lowe in his keynote address to the *European Society for Rural Sociology* in 2009. He contended that, in the process of conducting research and engaging with stakeholders, the 'social sciences enact novel realities' partly through the way in which they 'create phenomena through the procedures they establish to discover them' (Lowe,

2009). He went on to argue that this process is not uni-directional. That is, social scientists are similarly acted upon and influenced by their research partners, dialogues and engagements – with often unexpected and, potentially, very creative outcomes.

This article elaborates exactly these kinds of unexpected and creative outcomes as they occurred over a 15-year engagement with the agriculture sector initially focused on commercial organic production in New Zealand. These outcomes are evident in the shifting research emphases and approaches adopted within two successive research projects. In the following narrative, we discuss the transformation of a highly theory-driven and categorically structured appraisal of the political economy of organic agriculture in New Zealand through a series of key engagements between the researchers (including the authors) and research participants. These engagements effectively discomfited explanatory certainties, re-worked research objectives and altered the project methodologies. In this process, some of our original theoretical categories were significantly revised or completely discarded. Thus, this reflective narrative establishes the potential benefits of recognising both the importance of iterative/dialogic research strategies and the parallel recognition of the ontological politics of research practice. Both these, with the benefit of hindsight, enabled (and enacted) a more open and critical recognition of the influence (and its consequences) of the relationships with stakeholders that transformed and (hopefully) enlightened our narratives around the organic agriculture sector in New Zealand. We further hope to contribute to the ontological journeys undertaken by colleagues who are similarly seeking more compelling and relevant explanations of the condition of the rural as well as the role of the organic sector within it.

Philip Lowe's challenge to perform a more 'enactive' rural sociology forms one key starting point for this article. In addition, the narrative builds on the arguments in a recent article in this journal (Rosin and Campbell, 2009a). In that article, we concluded that despite 12 years of attempts to interpret the emergence of commercial organic agriculture according to the theoretical canons of agricultural political economy, new theoretical and methodological approaches were both asserting a serious challenge to prior approaches and providing an opportunity to engage in more nuanced and complex analyses of organic agriculture. Rosin and Campbell (2009a) outlined the potential to open up new dimensions and dynamics to the theoretical interpretation of organic agriculture through the perspective of convention theory. By comparison to that primarily theoretical narrative, this article takes the discussion into the parallel terrain of how the acknowledgement of the multiple sites, processes, methodologies and research practices which generate and reproduce knowledge about organic agriculture contribute to a better understanding of both the constitution of organics in commercial settings as well as the appropriate methodologies which can be deployed around the examination and constitution of 'sustainable' agriculture.

In so doing, this article draws on the work of scholars like Law and Urry (2004) in calling for a greater centring of 'researcher ontologies' as they structure and enact realities, and yet are also potentially transformed by the research objects they encounter. The shift towards recognising (or simply to include) ontologies has a useful recent history in environmental sociology (eg. Carolan, 2004, 2009) both in terms of understanding the complex interpenetration of ecological and social dynamics (and the prevailing Western ontologies that have striven to categorically separate them), as well as in the practices of research itself.

The call by Philip Lowe for rural sociologists to grasp an understanding of 'enactive sociology' falls clearly within this new framing of the politics of research processes themselves. Similarly, researchers like Le Heron and Lewis (2011) made the call in a recent Editorial in

Geoforum for research practices, ontologies and enactments to be re-centred in our academic thinking – suggesting that there is a performativity to research which has been too often ignored. Our article falls squarely within this 'ontological turn' in understanding the consequences of our research processes and practices.

Reflecting on the processes, engagements, and enacted framings of research into organic agriculture in New Zealand demonstrates how the research process unfolds in ways that shift researcher ontologies in unexpected ways: making thinkable what was previously framed as unthinkable thereby opening up possibilities of outcomes and understandings that were previously excluded by strong theoretical framing or methodologies. Seen in this light, the existence of *Greening Food* and ARGOS enabled both a critical reframing of academic constructions of organic development as well as an enacting and reinforcing role in particular development trajectories themselves.

2. Researching commercial organics: between capitalism and utopia?

Strongly held normative claims attributed to organic agriculture establish a considerable challenge to the distillation of more open-ended ontological approaches to organic agriculture. This challenge is rooted in two distinct aspects of organics as a field of enquiry. First, the study of commercial organic agriculture commenced (as did the upsurge in organic commerce itself) at a time when the critical sociology and geography of agricultural change in the North was struggling to emerge from several decades of adherence to structuralist Marxist theorisation. The initial manifestations of the research programmes reported in this article were no exception. Because of this theoretical baggage, any move beyond narrowly focused political economy approaches to embrace a more contingent, multi-sited and open-ended account of the commercialisation of organic agriculture involved, in part, an ontological journey by the researchers themselves.¹ If our experience is any indication, such a journey is partly facilitated by a process of research engagement with new commercial actors in the organic industry.

The second challenge is the result of the value-creation and exchange dynamics associated with organic agriculture that are different to most other forms of agricultural commerce (with the exception of other niche, labelled and certified products like Fair Trade). To a large degree, the distinctive nature of organic food is derived from its participation in wider realms of normative aspiration about sustainability. In this discursive arena, it is partly formed and re-formed by the actions of a wider social movement. As a result, the meaning of organics (and the varieties of practice that comprise the multiple dimensions of the organic food chain) extends beyond a broadly defined model of industrial praxis to act as what Paul Ricoeur (1986) described as a 'utopian perspective' from which to critique the established ideology of the global food system. In this sense, a pure form of organics should not necessarily be considered an achievable reality (especially given the contingencies of temporal, spatial and social context). Rather, as a utopia, organics defines a desirable condition that is the basis for a normative critique of the legitimacy of the practices, ethics and conventions that support the contemporary agri-food system.

¹ On a much broader theoretical and methodological canvas, Gibson-Graham (1996) advocated for the need to move away from the doom-laden narratives of capitalist political economy and search for new methodologies beyond the culture of despair that pervaded much study of capitalist history and change. A similar move is signalled in Richard Le Heron's use of the term 'post-structural political economy' in the context of his work with Wendy Larner and Nick Lewis (see Le Heron, 2003, 2007; Larner and Le Heron, 2002a, 2002b; Larner et al., 2007).

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