

**FROM MOVEMENT TO INDUSTRY:
ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA**

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how organic standards have shaped the thought and practice of organic agriculture in British Columbia. While organic agriculture is often viewed as offering an alternative to the unsustainable trajectory of conventional agriculture, this thesis argues that commercialized organic agriculture as it currently exists offers only a minor potential for food system reform.

Organic farming pioneers who originally came together at the grassroots in BC aspired to enact radical agrarian ideals that could counteract the social and environmental ills wrought by decades of adherence to conventional agriculture. By creating organic certification schemes that granted mainstream market access to organic producers, these farmers attempted to promote their ideals by transforming organic agriculture from a marginal fringe movement into a formal capitalist enterprise. While commercialization has reaped benefits, at the same time the standardization of organic agriculture that is prerequisite to sought-after market access has considerably undermined progress towards the 'alternative' goals advocated by organic farmers I interviewed.

Issues I explore throughout show that the operationalization of 'organic' via codified certification standards has given way over time to a gradual erosion of organic principles. I argue that despite the efforts to impart knowledge of, and enforce adherence to, 'pure' notions of organic practice through organic standards, the pressure of market forces instead causes growers to sacrifice organic ideals in the name of taking measures to boost productivity instead. As organic agriculture is integrated ever more deeply into regimes of certification and standardization required for participation in the market, it has become more and more akin to the very conventional agricultural paradigm it was originally intended to oppose. In sum, although the organic market has grown with remarkable speed in recent years, this growth cannot be viewed as indicative of the arrival of a truly radical 'alternative paradigm' of agriculture.

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List of Acronyms

BCARA	British Columbia Association for Regenerative Agriculture
BCMAFF	British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Fisheries
CCOF	California Certified Organic Farmers
COABC	Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia
COPA	Caribou Organic Producers Association
CROPS	Comox Region Organic Producers
FVOPA	Fraser Valley Organic Producers Association
IFOAM	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements
IOIA	Independent Organic Inspectors Association
IOPA	Island Organic Producers Association
NOOA	North Okanagan Organic Growers Association
OPACK	Organic Producers Association of Cawston and Keremeos
PACS	Pacific Agricultural Certification Society
PMRA	Pest Management Regulatory Agency
PROPA	Peace River Organic Producers Association
SOOPA	Similkameen Okanagan Organic Producers Association
SRC	Standards Review Committee

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 From Movement to Industry

This thesis investigates how organic standards have shaped the practice of organic farming in British Columbia, and focuses particularly on the struggles that exist among organic farmers because of those standards. Formerly marginalized in a market dominated by the capital-intensive, production-oriented paradigm of conventional agriculture, early organic farmers gained the opportunity to access a new organic niche market in the late 1980s when consumer demand for organic food began to rise. Inspired by this consumption change, progenitor organic farmers formed a grassroots movement to supply the emerging organic market. Accessing the market hinged on the creation of certification standards that could objectively distinguish the products of organic farmers from those of conventional farmers.

While certification has given organic farmers access to the market, perpetual struggles over how to define organic has led to ideological ruptures within their community. Because standards have gradually been eroded as the organic sector has grown, the farmers who pioneered certification in BC now lament the quality of farming carried out under its legitimating authority. More generally, this turn of events problematizes the commonsense view that organic agriculture represents a 'sustainable alternative' to conventional agriculture.

In order to secure the trust of consumers, and to prevent those who have not grown their crops organically from fraudulently advertising them as such, certification guarantees that products labeled as 'organic' have actually been grown using organic techniques. To become certified, farmers must meet requirements for organic production

as they are codified in the standards of their particular certifying body. These include precisely defined expectations regarding soil husbandry, pest control, water quality, and other environmental management considerations. Standards explicitly state what inputs and practices are allowable, and how they can be used. To meet certification requirements, farmers are required to design a farm plan that conforms with standards, and to keep detailed records of many of their daily activities. Typically once a year, they must provide records of planting, harvesting, and storage practices to an on-site inspector. The role of the inspector is to verify that the farmer has in fact complied with certification standards as required by the certifying body. If they have, 'certified organic' status, and thereby access to the organic market, is granted.

The organic community in BC aimed to establish an alternative agricultural economy permitting those wishing to farm organically to do so without having to compete against highly capitalized conventional farms that produced greater yields of non-organic produce. To pursue this goal, organic farmers formed certifying bodies and began certifying themselves and other interested farmers. Dedication to certification as the BC organic industry's primary strategy of economic expansion over the years is demonstrated by the tremendous amount of energy organic farmers have expended in running certifying bodies, revising certification standards, forging legally-binding regulatory ties with industry and government, and targeting consumers using 'British Columbia Certified Organic' labelling. This strategy appears to have been quite successful. The unprecedented proliferation of organic agriculture in BC during the 1980s and especially the 1990s has largely been the result of pioneer organic farmers' efforts to establish and maintain grassroots regimes of certification. Certification has

allowed organic farming to prosper as a value-added type of agriculture that garners a premium price for its products. Entering the market has transformed organic farming into a vibrant, successful economic sector drawing in new participants and their capital.

But as I will argue throughout this thesis, and based upon the interviews I carried out with pioneer farmers, creating certification standards was about more than just enhancing profitability. It also represented an ideological challenge to conventional agriculture. Conventional agriculture is predicated on the belief that farmers cannot do without expensive fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery, and more generally, that they must engage in economies of scale and technologically efficient production in order to be successful. In contrast, organic farmers objected to this very ideological structure and its associated set of practices. They farmed organically not because it was profitable for them (most of them grew organically before there was a market for organic products), but because it was commensurate with values they believed in. Those beliefs included that everyone should have the right to choose farming as an occupation, and that they should be able to farm in a manner that did not compromise the health of land or people. Local producers should not be squeezed out of business by cheaper imports from unsustainable corporate farms, and they should not have to use dangerous, ecologically-destructive chemicals to make a living farming. Rather, agricultural economies should maximize local production for local consumption, and reward ecologically sound farming practices as means of ensuring food security. For such reasons organic farmers believed it was better to promote the decentralization of farms of different sizes rather than the concentration of many farms into fewer and fewer large ones. Motivating farmers, then, was not primarily money, but what I refer to as a 'radical agrarian' ideology. It was this

ideology that provided the impetus to create regimes of certification that would persuade more farmers to adopt organic methods.

The rapid growth of BC's organic sector testifies to the commercial success of the organic movement. Widely cited as growing at 20% per year, the estimated value of organic production in BC jumped from \$20 million to \$29.5 million between 2003 and 2004 (Macey, 2004; Macey, 2005). Following the introduction of certification, the number of organic farmers and the amount of land under organic production in BC increased greatly. Though certification has been instrumental to this success, over time its limitations have become apparent. For example, in order to make organic farming a realistic option for new farmers, certification standards must be devised in a manner that is intelligible to beginners unfamiliar with the nuances of organic techniques. Farmers that convert from conventional to organic farming often face daunting challenges as the abandonment of conventional techniques initially leaves them less able to deal with degraded soils and tenacious pest populations. To give new farmers means of coping with these potentially detrimental barriers, standards must not be so strict as to impede inexperienced growers from becoming certified. For this reason, controversial inputs and practices are sometimes included under organic standards.

This issue is complicated also by the fact that new farmers do not necessarily share the ideals held by original organic farmers. Because certification standards are subject to collective amendment by certifying body members, there has been over time a watering down of standards as less radical farmers have joined the ranks. As a result, as more conventional farmers have converted to certified organic production, the original aim of organic farmers to uphold agrarian values has been sidetracked and diffused as it

has become entangled with the needs and interests of new organic farmers. More generally, what we see then is an internal tension that has been created by the very success of certification. Certification has created higher returns which has led to more producers entering into the organic market, not necessarily for ideological reasons but commercial ones. And as they have entered, they have altered the very basis of the certification standards that was the reason for them entering into the organic market in the first place. Success has not bred success, but in this case discontent and frustration on the part of pioneer organic farmers.

1.2 The Politics of Organic Certification

Though commonly associated with outcomes of ecological soundness and social justice, in practice the extent to which organic farming actually results in these ends being realized is conditioned by the way 'organic' is codified - and continues to be recodified - under certification standards. Because organic farming is entirely contingent on local physical geographical factors such as soil type, climate, availability of water and sunlight, and so on, there are many ways to translate its philosophical principles into a standardized form. Because of this ambiguity, where to draw the line between 'organic' and 'conventional' farming has been a continual source of disagreement, one that has only aggravated the more fundamental conflict between early and later organic farmers.

Originally, there were very few certifying bodies, each independently responsible for drafting its own respective certification standard. Even within these groups, deciding what to include in the official rules was not self-evident. Consideration of local environmental constraints, economic pressures, and agroecological ideals were reconciled

differently in each case. The growing enrolment of many farmers unfamiliar with traditional organic techniques throughout the 1990s complicated the challenges of producing standards that would be faithful to the original organic philosophy, yet also practical for farmers who needed to be productive enough to survive in a market-driven economy. The proliferation of certifying bodies, each with its own distinct certification scheme, eventually led to calls for a uniform BC organic standard. Previous research suggests that the process of harmonizing standards across increasingly larger geographical scales tends to result in the dilution of organic standards (DeLind, 2000; Guthman, 2004). Certainly this is a trait that has come to characterize organic agriculture in BC. As I will show, the predominant discourse of organic now pervading the industry, that which is legitimated and administered by the provincially-accredited Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia [COABC], increasingly replicates conventional agriculture at the expense of the more rigorous soil husbandry practices that progenitor organic farmers used in the beginning.

Because certification directly determines who can become an organic farmer and on what terms, the struggles that have taken place within the organic movement over the definition of 'organic' are of particular interest to this study. Although there are many more organic farmers on the land in BC today than there were ten years ago, pioneer farmers I interviewed argued that many certified organic farmers employ practices that signify an incomplete rather than 'paradigmatic' departure from conventional agriculture. For example, they assert that in contrast to the incorporation of off-farm energy recycling practices advocated in organic farming philosophy, many new organic farmers rely solely

on energy-intensive off-farm input substitutes.¹ While this may be enough to meet certification standards to a minimum degree, in effect such farming practices tend to lead toward the monocultural cropping patterns and excessive dependence on off-farm inputs that define conventional agriculture. The initiative taken in 1993 to establish the 'British Columbia Certified Organic' standard, while intended to reconcile once and for all the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of 'organic', has instead precipitated further fractures within the organic community.

More generally, while the growth of the organic market has successfully induced a growing number of farmers to become organic, over time contradictions between the logic of organic philosophy on one hand, and the logic of the market on the other, have progressively eroded the possibility of enacting the 'alternative' vision originally articulated by the organic movement. As BC's organic market has grown, so has the pressure to remain competitive against organic producers in other regions of the world. The result, I will argue, has been a tendency to sacrifice the original social and environmental agenda of organic production in the name of improved competitiveness. Where this conflict is primarily fought out is precisely in debates over the exact requirements for certification. It is here that competing discourses of 'organic' are found, where 'purists' debate with 'pragmatists' over the correct relationship between organic ideals and practices. Deep ideological splits within the organic community have arisen as many movement pioneers are now ambivalent toward, if not alienated from, the contemporary organic industry.

¹ 'Input substitution' refers to the practice of substituting 'conventional' inputs for 'natural' ones as a means of enacting 'alternative' agriculture. Rosset and Altieri (1997:284) have challenged the 'alternativeness' of this approach as incomplete since it "only emphasizes environmentally benign alternatives to agrochemical inputs, without challenging either the monoculture structure or the dependence on off-farm inputs that characterize agricultural systems".

Meanwhile, agrarian values not amenable to certification, such as the promotion of biodiversity, social justice, and so on, have receded further into the background as organic regulation has become increasingly focused on protecting and expanding market share. It is, of course, difficult to imagine how 'non-market' values such as 'ecological soundness' or 'local embeddedness' could be appropriately valued using technical standards. Nevertheless, these were the kinds of ideals farmers who forged the organic movement were aiming to achieve. Accordingly, in large part this thesis turns around the trade-offs that the organic movement has negotiated on the path to commercialization. In doing so, it shows how the marketplace is a powerful limiting institution, thwarting the progressive social agenda that the original organic movement heralded.

So while it is convenient to think that organic agriculture is tied exclusively to an anti-establishment, 'back to the land' ideology that exists beyond the decontextualizing imperatives of capitalist commodification, the truth is more messy. Though 'organic' farms are often small-scale, ecologically managed, and supported by local consumers through direct marketing, there are also many 'conventional' farms with the same attributes. The same may be said of highly-capitalized, productivist farms, which also exist in both 'conventional' and 'organic' forms. Using my BC case study as an example, I will try to show throughout that no straightforward opposition can be presumed between 'organic' and 'conventional'. A given set of farming practices does not necessarily equate with particular organizational or economic attributes; while many of the organic farmers interviewed for this study self-identified as individuals with 'hippie' roots, at the same time they did not hesitate to view the market as a potentially powerful vehicle for

realizing the social change they collectively sought. And as organic agriculture in BC has grown, their goals have not been realized.

1.3 The 'Conventionalization' of Organic Agriculture

The themes that have emerged from my case study are represented more generally in the literature on 'alternative food networks' where previous studies of organic agriculture have also highlighted the importance of certification. The central finding of research in this area is that as organic agriculture has grown, it has become increasingly removed from the practices and values that originally differentiated it from conventional agriculture (Buck et al, 1997; Guthman, 1998; Guthman, 2004). This phenomenon of 'conventionalization', that is, the collection of processes through which organic agriculture has been transformed to become more like conventional agriculture, cannot be understood without examining the pivotal role of organic certification in that transformation. The entry of corporate interests, dilution of organic standards, and bifurcation of the organic movement into radical and non-radical factions are all aspects of conventionalization that are shaped by certification. This is because rather than clearly distinguishing 'organic' agriculture from 'conventional' agriculture, over time the competitive economic dynamics that certification has enabled have ironically helped to contravene that very separation.

For example, organic farmers seeking to employ innovative ecological production strategies that go beyond the expectations of standards can become placed at a comparative disadvantage against those who do not aspire to the same ideals and therefore farm in a less intensively 'organic' manner. Furthermore, as distributors and

retailers indifferent to agrarian ideals have entered the organic market in pursuit of price premiums, capital has become more concentrated within the sector causing economic clout to accrue to larger producers (Buck et al, 1997). This dynamic has placed pressure on producers to boost yields in order to retain access to markets. In some cases, the result has been the abandonment of labour-intensive organic management practices as more producers have turned to energy-intensive off-farm inputs in efforts to generate greater yields (Guthman, 2004). To the extent that it assimilates organic agriculture to the same logic that governs other sectors of the conventional economy, certification actually hampers the ability of organic farmers to employ ecological rather than productivist practices.

The desertion of traditional organic practices for energy-intensive ones that ensnare producers in off-farm circuits of capital accumulation is a trend that has emerged over time due to the steady watering down of organic standards (Guthman, 2004). This is because as the number of producers entering the organic sector motivated exclusively by profit has increased, they have come to exert greater political influence over the revision, and therefore content of standards. Previous studies have provided cases studies where large producers were shown to oppose precisely those items in standards that pose the greatest impediments to productivity (Lockie et al, 2000; Guthman, 2004). The politics surrounding certification, then, have direct implications for the economic conditions that ultimately shape who can survive as an organic farmer.

This summary of the conventionalization argument is not intended to imply that certification has been all bad for the organic movement, or that conventionalization is some sovereign force that will automatically appropriate local organic movements in

identical fashion everywhere. On the contrary, comparison of regional studies highlights that there are "important differences among contributors to the conventionalisation thesis, particularly over the inevitability, extent, and alternatives to these processes" (Lockie and Halpin, 2005:286). For example, it is notable that in some cases, the dilution of standards has been answered by a 'defensive localism' where disenchanted organic farmers have actually decertified and then attempted to re-embed their alternative values using other means (Lockie et al, 2000; Guthman, 2004). Conventionalization, then, cannot be thought of as an abstract force colonizing organic movements everywhere unopposed.

Rather, the point is that regimes of certification are dynamic fields of interaction. Different regional, national, and international standards all interact to create geographically differentiated regulatory configurations. In BC, for instance, regional certifying bodies follow different standards which are tailored to suit each body's respective regional biophysical conditions, but which also conform with the provincially-accredited standardization program administered by COABC. This program, in turn, is itself structured to accommodate and shift over time in accordance with supra-national standards such as those of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements [IFOAM] and the EU.

In sum, the argument of my thesis is that the claim that the growth of the organic market in BC demonstrates the rise of an alternative paradigm of agriculture is overblown. This study will show that in spite of its ostensibly radical social movement origins, as organic agriculture is integrated ever more deeply into regimes of certification and standardization required for participation in the market, it has become more and more akin to the very conventional agricultural paradigm it was originally intended to oppose.

I argue that as organic agriculture has grown, the fundamental problem of translating philosophical ideals into verifiable 'organic' practices has become exacerbated as large numbers of conventional farmers have become certified organic. While the founders of BC's organic movement thought that creating certification standards would suffice to uphold agrarian values of small-scale, ecologically sound production within the context of the market, this strategy has proven much more complicated and challenging than anticipated. As the values of progenitor organic farmers which represented the greatest counter-hegemonic potential have been compromised by a progressive dilution of standards, the very impulse to farm organically has been substantially undermined.

Chapter 2 - Exploring the Organic Movement

1.1 Choosing a Direction

How does 'organic' agriculture address the problems that have resulted from the displacement of 'traditional' agricultures by 'modern'/'conventional' agriculture? This thesis represents my attempt to grapple further with troubling food politics issues I was originally exposed to as an undergraduate. The courses I took during that time suggested that in many parts of the world a kind of paradigmatic opposition between 'modern' and 'traditional' farming techniques underscored the postwar history of agriculture. Modern agriculture marched forward virtually uncontested, and in its wake, traditional agriculture has been all but erased in many countries. Yet as modern agriculture interrupts traditional agricultures in more and more areas, its pitfalls become more obvious and more disturbing. One of my main goals in this thesis is to widen the debate about possible future agricultures in the hopes that someday we can move beyond the 'modern' versus 'traditional' dualism toward agricultures that are productive, but also ecologically regenerative and socially just.

A course I took on the geography of Latin America during my undergrad degree was particularly important for stirring my interest in this area. I read in that class, for instance, how the structural adjustment programs of the IMF are increasingly causing Latin American countries to replace traditional agricultural practices with 'modern' conventional agriculture by imposing export-led development policies that require people to cultivate cash crops at the expense of traditional, sustainable subsistence crops. Time and again, such imperatives lead to destabilizing trends in Central and South America: the dispossession of private lands in favour of monoculture plantations; the import to

those countries of highly toxic pesticides banned in the US; the destruction of biodiversity and degradation of soil and water, and so on. In short, the export-led development policies that are supposed to improve life for people in these countries instead make them more dependent on capricious global market conditions, undermining their ability to feed themselves since when cash crop prices fall too low, too little money is left over for food to eat. As the potential end consumer of such cash crops, I became troubled by the feeling of being personally embroiled in this exploitative set of relations, and came to resent the reckless proliferation of conventional agriculture that I was inadvertently supporting with my purchasing power.

Particularly following World War II, a belief in the superiority of conventional agriculture gained credence not only in Latin America, but in the world in general. Proponents of conventional agriculture argued that it was more efficient, more productive, and therefore ultimately more rational than traditional agricultures. But because it is so heavily dependent on fossil fuels, so destructive of soils and ecosystems, so hazardous to farm labourers, and so financially risky for operators, it is arguable that large-scale conventional agriculture is anything but 'rational'. As I learned more about the drawbacks of conventional agriculture, I gradually came to see the food I bought on a day to day basis through a new pair of eyes. I became more aware of the sheer anonymity of the food available in grocery stores. Much of it is imported from huge farms in such distant places as Mexico, Brazil, and Chile under conditions that I did not and could not know anything about.

I was left ambivalent in grocery stores by the emotional contradiction of wanting to eat a variety of tasty foods and yet not knowing how they had been produced, or

whether their purchase would reinforce exploitative labour conditions. I became particularly anxious over imported fruits. Was my consumption of bananas contributing to deforestation and dispossession in Ecuador? Were the grapes laced with DDT residue that had gone unnoticed by food safety inspectors? Where were those mangoes from, and how was my ability to buy them on a casual whim linked with certain material consequences for the people living in the land of their origin? The ethical dilemmas became endless and irreconcilable. Exposure to food politics issues had, in short, left me feeling indignant and powerless. It was this emotional state that sparked my desire to write a thesis that would allow me to continue learning about the hidden costs of modern food provision in hopes that I could learn about possible alternatives.

I decided to choose a topic that would enable me to explore a food politics issue in my local region. After all, since my grocery store anxiety had already shifted my purchasing focus to seeking out locally grown foods, focusing my thesis on local food politics related my work to transactions in which I was involved personally. It was during a visit to the Trout Lake farmers' market that I eventually settled more clearly on one issue: what can (or cannot) the practice of organic agriculture offer in terms of a challenge to the dominant paradigm of conventional agriculture, and how does organic certification itself impact this process?

Operating outside the confines of mainstream commercial venues, producers at the market had more control over pricing, saw a much higher percentage of returns, and won loyal customers through direct contact. Meanwhile, I and other consumers who were so disposed could access food in a manner that gratified our aesthetic and political sensibilities. At the farmers' market, produce was fresher and more varied than that

found at the supermarket. At the same time, consumers could find out precisely how the food had been produced simply by asking the farmer standing in front of them. The farmers' market seemed to close the proverbial gap between farm and table that siphons profits away from farmers while keeping consumers ignorant about the origins of their food. It is the site of an alternative agricultural economy that attempts to deliver a better product at a fairer price for farmers, and which repositions producers and consumers in a more mutually beneficial relation to one another. In these respects, it seemed opposite to the anonymity of the grocery store.

Many of the consumers milling about the market appeared to be there exclusively to buy organic produce. At the stalls of organic growers, I heard people speak approvingly of the various merits of the organic method. Whether it was because it was purported to be safer, better for the soil, more nutritious, or tastier, the enthusiasm so evident at the market was based on the belief that organic produce was better than produce grown by conventional agricultural methods. Customers also voiced enthusiasm about being able to support an alternative form of agriculture directly by buying organic food at the market. Belief in the 'better quality' of organic food available at the market was reinforced by the fact that each vendor selling organic food was required to display clearly a third-party 'certified organic' certificate. Because customers were willing to pay higher prices to buy organic food and to support organic agriculture, certification of the actual produce was necessary to legitimate the claim that an 'authentic' organic standard of quality had been met.

But to what degree can a particular set of agrarian values be codified and advanced simply through conscious consumer choice facilitated by green labelling? I

decided to explore systematically what certified organic agriculture could offer as an alternative in terms of its production practices, but more generally in its different politics of food. The case of organic agriculture in BC seemed an ideal one for testing the hypothesis of green consumption.²

Modern food provision is organized according to conventional economic principles of supply and demand such that those who can produce, transport, and sell the greatest volumes of food in the least amount of time are most likely to reap financial success. However, this is not necessarily a just or rational system, and it should not be taken for granted as the only one available. Green consumption is an alternative perspective which contends that typical market transactions incur hidden costs in the short term that, over the long term, ultimately raise costs by undermining the 'natural capital' of healthy soils, pure air, clean water, and so on. In contrast, attempting to account for and incorporate these 'hidden costs' into the price of food might help to conserve the resource base essential to agricultural production. Green labels, such as 'certified organic' ones, have the potential to empower consumers by enabling them to identify and actively support through their purchases those companies that meet desirable environmental standards. If enough consumers support 'green' companies, eventually others company will have to become more 'green' as well in order to remain competitive. In this way, advocates of green consumption argue that it can democratize capitalism by providing consumers with a more rational basis of choice.

Critics assert that 'certified organic', and other such labelling schemes constitute nothing more than 'greenwashing', the inculcation of a false perception among consumers

² 'Green consumption' is the idea that consumers can strategically use their purchasing power to drive environmental reforms by consciously choosing to support specifically those businesses that adhere to environmentally-friendly production practices.

that so-called 'green' companies are really doing the good things for the environment that they say they are. This perspective challenges the notion that mere labels can afford consumers a clear view of companies' practices and their impact on the environment. Instead, green marketing is simply a way for businesses to justify charging higher prices.

These considerations figured directly into the way I wanted to examine organic agriculture. I wanted to know the degree to which BC organic agriculture delivered on the promise of green consumption. Did the commercial rise of organic agriculture signify the dawn of a paradigm shift in agriculture, or was it merely a new avenue for extracting profit? Perhaps it represented some sort of middle road between these two alternatives.

Aside from the superficial representations I had been exposed to as a consumer, I initially knew little about BC's organic sector. When I set out to get my bearings on the subject, I was surprised to find that very little information existed. Quantitative data was extremely limited. It has only been since 2002 that the federal agricultural census finally started including a section on organic farming. Meanwhile, the earliest statistical publications on BC's organic sector currently available from COABC only date back to 2003. Although once of negligible economic significance, as the organic sector has continued to grow, businesses and governments have come to desire more information about it. As more people become eager to support, invest in, and capitalize on the organic sector, statistics on organic agriculture are slowly becoming more available.

Even if plenty of numerical data had been available, clearly there were limits to what I could find out just from looking at numbers. Because I wanted to explore the social meanings of organic agriculture, I needed to get at the subjective attitudes and values that had given rise to the organic movement. Given this purpose, numbers were

not enough. More than anything, I needed to find the right people to interview. But to make proper use of these interviews, I first needed to get a basic picture of the history of organic agriculture in BC. I wanted to learn why organic agriculture had expanded so dramatically among the farmers of BC, and to find out which knowledgeable insiders I should try to contact in order to learn more.

I began by making exploratory phone calls to certifying body representatives, organic wholesalers, and retailers. Through these phone calls I learned that while a strong organic farming tradition had existed in some BC communities since at least the 1970s, it had not been until the 1990s that organic agriculture had truly begun to proliferate. The expansion of organic agriculture at that time was spearheaded largely thanks to the efforts of an original set of organic farming 'pioneers' who had worked together at the grassroots to found certifying bodies. These pioneers had set out with an explicit intent to forge an 'organic movement' as an alternative to conventional agriculture. Creating the first rules of certification for organic farmers in BC was the most decisive step they had taken towards this end. I was struck by the fact that, without fail, the organic industry contacts I spoke with always referred me to one or more of these pioneers for more information. I was fortunate to secure interviews with a number of them shortly thereafter.

Searching the on-line directory of COABC allowed me to locate contact information for organic farmers registered with the various certifying bodies throughout the province. By contacting the representatives of certifying bodies, I identified the names of twenty-six veteran organic farmers to whom I subsequently sent letters of contact. I then followed up with phone calls two weeks later to find out who was

available for interview. Using these means I secured interviews with fourteen farmers, seven of whom had been directly involved in the creation of the original standards of the two earliest certifying bodies in BC: the British Columbia Association for Regenerative Agriculture [BCARA] of the Fraser Valley, and the Similkameen Okanagan Organic Producers Association [SOOPA] of the Similkameen Valley. Farmers from the Fraser Valley I interviewed are closely connected to urban markets in Vancouver and commute regularly to make deliveries here. Consequently, I arranged to interview these farmers on days when they were already planning to be in the city. Other farmers I interviewed reside in the Similkameen Valley, the Okanagan, and Vancouver Island. I was fortunate to be able to meet with and interview these other individuals when I attended the 2003 Annual General Meeting of COABC held at Crescent Beach near White Rock, BC.

1.2 Institutional Ethnography

The bulk of my analysis rests on the primary data culled from interviews with organic farmers. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, taped, and transcribed. My interviews with farmers explored questions regarding issues such as the origins and history of the organic movement in BC, practical challenges of organic farming, and the politics of certification. The transcripts of the interviews comprise an archive of separate accounts narrating the transformation of organic agriculture from a fringe movement to a mainstream industry. I will draw extensively from these transcripts throughout.³

In large part, this transformation has been an institutional one. The development of organic agriculture in BC has been inseparable from the influence of a host of formal

³ Quotations of interviewees will be single-spaced and in boldface font throughout. In cases where the speaker is not named in the text, the name will be included in square brackets directly following the quote.

and informal institutions, including regional certifying bodies, COABC, and the Independent Organic Inspectors Association [IOIA], which have emerged over the last twenty years. In different ways, these institutions have collectively exerted a decisive mediating effect on how organic agricultural practices are overseen via certification standards.

But the protocols of institutions and the experiences of those bound by them are two different things. Because I wanted to explore the experiences of farmers themselves to see how these were linked to institutional discourses of organic agriculture, I approached the interview process following the method of 'institutional ethnography'. Institutional ethnography was first developed by the feminist critic Dorothy Smith, who used examples from imperial history as well as contemporary times to show how ethnographic enquiries are defined by "men's lives and contexts" (DeVault, 1999:47). More generally, she argued that historically, ethnographic knowledge has been mobilized in the service of dominant groups rather than the marginal ones it studied (Smith, 2005).

The crux of the critique is that traditional categories of ethnographic research are premised on a predominant academic discourse that regards the researcher as expert and the subject as ignorant. This power discrepancy lends an unjustified sense of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' to the researcher's findings, however abstracted they may be from the actual lives of subjects. By conceptualizing their work as a process of 'going into the field' and 'bringing back data', researchers create knowledge that is defined and categorized according to their own assumptions, excluding from consideration the actual experiences of subjects themselves. The key point is that by erasing marginal voices, ethnographic knowledge is ultimately placed in the service of preexisting discourses that

efface social inequalities. This produces a kind of knowledge that works to reinforce 'ruling relations' rather than to challenge them (Smith, 2002).

Institutional ethnography focuses explicitly on institutions because they "construct forms of consciousness - knowledge, information, facts, administrative and legal rules, and so on - that override individual's perspectives" (Smith, 2002:22). A central tenet of institutional ethnography is that institutions intervene in and structure the everyday lives of people in numerous and often unrecognized ways that stabilize a particular 'complex of social relations' (DeVault, 1999). In order to identify the specific 'social relations' that mediate people's actions, institutional ethnography "begins with the issues and problems of people's lives and develops inquiry from the standpoint of their experience in and of the actualities of their everyday living" (Smith, 2002:18). Research is carried out on explicitly 'dialogic' terms, meaning that the researcher and the subject are regarded not in the hierarchical terms of 'expert' and 'subject', but as co-creators of a provisional, partial knowledge that is contingent, fluid, and impermanent, rather than objective or absolute.

While ethnographic research has always been concerned with producing knowledge about marginal groups, the express purpose of institutional ethnography is to empower those it studies. While acknowledging that the experiences of individuals are always unique, it ultimately seeks to empower the members of marginal groups by revealing to them how their idiosyncratic personal experiences are 'permeated' and 'coordinated' by multiple and overlapping 'extralocal' social relations. Rather than looking to official mandates to understand how institutions affect the world, institutional ethnography takes a less normative view by treating subjects as the primary bearers of

wisdom. In this way it attempts to produce knowledge that is 'for' rather than 'about' its subjects (Smith, 2005). To help shape research so that it will be 'for' subjects, institutional ethnographers usually use interviews to explore how the experiences of individuals are shaped by the institution in question. By leaving the breadth of questioning wide open during the initial phase of interviewing, categories of enquiry are not preconceived, but emerge gradually through the research process. In this way, the dynamic experiences of subjects are utilized as entry points for exploring the generalizing power exercised by institutions. In contrast to more traditional ethnographic approaches, where interviewing is viewed as sampling a discrete, localized population, institutional ethnography emphasizes how interviews provide a 'point of entry' through which a wider complex of social processes may be grasped.

The approach seeks to show how the ability of institutions to exert power across disparate locations lies ultimately in how they coordinate the everyday actions of people: "in institutional settings, people are actively producing the generalized out of the particular" (Smith, 2002:43). For example, at the same time that a school's curriculum and administrative apparatus dictate the material that students will be expected to learn, no learning can take place without the active participation of students. The institutional function of 'education' requires the coordination of many different actors spread across different sites in order to be fulfilled. Or in the case of this study, the function of 'organic agriculture' is carried out by the coordination of farmers' actions with the rules of certifying bodies, inspection agencies, marketers, and so on.

Looking at how the daily lives of people are 'textually mediated' by the particular policies, routines, records, and surveillance mechanisms that the institution uses to order

and keep track of people dispersed geographically in a key way institutional ethnographers attempt to grasp social coordination. Texts are central because they are one of the main devices used by institutions to instill the cooperation and compliance from people necessary to fulfilling institutional functions. Since social relations only exist to the extent that they are enacted by people's actions, ruling relations are constantly in flux, subject to struggle and change. Texts help to create stability amidst that flux. While organic farmers are dispersed across a variety of locations, their actions are coordinated by certification regulations, inspectors records, and market demographics in a manner that cause them to all comply with production standards. This compliance creates a perception of consistency of production that is necessary to sustaining the organic sector.

I chose to take an institutional ethnography approach for a few different reasons. First of all, organic farmers are a marginal group not usually represented in mainstream representations of agriculture. Using this approach allowed me to gain accounts of the experiences of actual organic farmers that would otherwise have been unattainable. Furthermore, as I have stated, institutional ethnography emphasizes knowledge production that is actually intended 'for' subjects and not just 'about' them. One of my main aims in choosing this research strategy was to produce a thesis that could benefit anyone interested in understanding or advocating alternative forms of agriculture, particularly organic agriculture. By leaving room for my interviewees to help define the terms of our discussions, I tried to perform a 'dialogic' kind of research that addresses issues of importance to actual organic farmers. By speaking with the farmers who pioneered the organic movement, I identified issues that were meaningful to them. This

helped me to gain a sense of criteria by which the successes and failures of the organic movement could be assessed.

1.3 Characteristics of Farmers Interviewed

Using taped interviews, then, was an indispensable research strategy for this study, not only because historical documentation of organic agriculture in BC was unavailable, but also because the subtle perspectives offered by the farmers who founded the organic movement simply could not have been accessed any other way. Private interviews gave subjects the opportunity to speak more freely about controversial issues than they might have otherwise. While their agrarian ideological sentiments would probably have been expressed regardless of my research strategy, the nuanced descriptions they gave of the disputes that exist within the organic community may not have surfaced so readily in the presence of other farmers (in the case of a focus group strategy), or if I had not been physically present to prod them to go deeper into their initial responses to my questions (in the case of a survey or questionnaire strategy).

Figure 1 lays out background information about each of the farmers who agreed to do an interview for this research. Listed in the first column are the pseudonyms I have given them. In accordance with the ethics code of my university, throughout this paper I will refer to the interviewees using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The second column shows the combined number of years of farming (both organically and conventionally when applicable). The third column gives the number of years of farming organically. The fourth column indicates the BC certifying body to which each interviewee belongs, and the fifth shows whether or not they were involved in drafting

the original organic standard of that body. Finally, the sixth column shows whether interviewees grew up on an organic farm, a conventional one, or neither (in the case of those who came from non-farming family backgrounds).

Figure 1 - Attributes of Farmers Interviewed

Pseudonym	Years of Farming	Years of Farming 'Organically'	Certifying Body	Drafted Original Standards?	Grew up on Organic or Conventional Farm?
Glen	30+	30+	SOOPA	Yes	Organic
Bev	25+	25+	Demeter	No	Organic
Gary	23	23	SOOPA	Yes	Organic
Jim	20+	20+	BCARA	Yes	Neither
Anne	20+	20+	BCARA	Yes	Organic
Peter	20+	20+	SOOPA	Yes	Organic
Paul	20+	17	BCARA	Yes	Conventional
Jane	21	17	BCARA	No	Conventional
Patty	16	16	SOOPA	Yes	Neither
Dave	15+	15+	BCARA	No	Neither
Rod	18	12	FVOPA ⁴	No	Organic
Jill	10	10	BCARA	No	Neither
Wendy	15+	9	FVOPA	No	Conventional
Joe	14	8	BCARA	No	Conventional/Organic

As indicated by the table, at the time of interviews, all but two farmers had ten or more years of organic farming experience, and six had more than twenty years. At the time of the interviews, the longest any of the farmers had been certified was seventeen years. In the case of the early pioneers, becoming certified usually did not oblige them to alter their farming practices very much, if at all. This was because many of them were the very people who had drawn up the original certification standards in the first place, and whose strategies of farm management had actually served as baseline examples of 'proper' organic farming practices on which those standards were partly based. These were people who had been practicing 'organic' methods before anyone else in BC, and

⁴ Fraser Valley Organic Producers' Association

who had created certification out of strong commitment to organic methods. In the case of some less experienced interviewees, becoming certified did entail significant changes in farming practices.

There were some who were originally conventional growers but most had originally started out as organic farmers. All interviewees were occupied as full-time, self-employed farmers rather than hobby farmers or seasonal labourers, but came from diverse backgrounds. How they came to organic farming is interesting. While each person told a different story, nonetheless there were some commonalities in their paths to organic farming. Specifically, one can recognize three distinct paths: those continuing an organic farming family tradition (six farmers); those who started out continuing a family tradition of conventional farming but later became organic farmers (four farmers); and first generation organic farmers who had no family farming background (four farmers). In making these categorizations, I do not want to create the impression that there is a predetermined relation between family background and becoming an organic farmer. Rather, my intent in using these categorizations is meant to highlight the heterogeneity of the backgrounds of organic farmers.

(i) Farmers who grew up organic farming

Six interviewees grew up using organic methods and cited carrying on family tradition as an important reason for becoming an organic farmer. For instance, each of the three European immigrants I interviewed saw their efforts to farm organically as carrying on family tradition. Each of them felt that organic farming was not a particularly unique thing to do. Rather, it was very similar to the customary method of

farming people had always practiced in their homelands. Speaking on behalf of other immigrant farmers he knew, "Peter", a German immigrant, conveyed this sentiment in the following way:

Many of us were growing organic because that's what people did back in the old country. And for a long time there were no standards we just did what we thought was organic, which turned out to be a really good way to go because it kept our motivations in the right place.

Growing up on a farm had exposed Peter from an early age to the organic techniques used by his parents, and allowed him to gain a subtle, intuitive appreciation of their benefits and challenges. Like the other immigrants I interviewed, he had chosen to farm organically not because it was profitable (which it was not at the time he first started), but because his experience had led him to prefer it over conventional farming.

Three other interviewees born in Canada who had also learned organic farming techniques handed down from their parents shared the sentiment that organic farming was second nature to them because it was the way they had originally learned to farm. "Anne", like many other farmers I interviewed, strongly advocated organic agriculture in principle, insisting that she had and would always farm organically regardless of market conditions:

We have been selling since 1990 because that's the earliest we could be certified, but I have always grown organically. That's the way I learned when I was growing up, and it's the way I'll continue to farm.

One of the founders of BCARA, Anne was particularly interested in promoting the view of organic agriculture as a social movement. She believed that organic farming was the 'right' way to farm, and devoted much of her energy during the interview to voicing her complaints about the forces that have caused BC's organic movement to lose, in her words, its "grassroots credibility". Criticizing commodification and its centralizing

effects as the root cause of this problem, Anne was particularly frank in her views, more than most other veteran organic farmers who espoused similar ideals. When I had initially contacted her by phone to find out if she would be willing to do an interview with me, she immediately asked me to explain the purpose of my research. Before I could respond she declared that if it was for some sort of "business" research she would refuse, and would only do an interview if I planned to look at "sustainability".

The depiction of organic agriculture as ethically sound was the overarching theme that tied together Anne's responses during my conversation with her. In many ways she matched the stereotype of the organic farmer as agrarian radical, praising organic agriculture while confidently voicing views deeply critical of conventional agriculture. At the same time she displayed an awareness that her views did not reflect equally on all farmers, describing herself as a "fanatic" with a "spiritual" commitment to organic agriculture.

"Rod" was another grower who had been raised on an organic farm. Like Anne, his responses to my questions emphasized the importance of upholding the integrity of organic ideals:

I grew up on a farm where we always stayed away from herbicides and pesticides. I've always believed in a good, clean product and I think that to be a real farmer you've got to be successful doing it organically. There's good conventional farmers, but a lot of bad ones too who aren't building soil and doing the things they should be doing.

As this quote shows, though Rod gave many reasons why he prefers to farm organically, he also pointed out that there are many "good conventional farmers" who should not be admonished simply because they are conventional farmers. He went on later in the

interview to explain that the economic challenges facing most farmers, whether organic or conventional, are tough to handle.

This point was also made by Anne, as well as by several other interviewees. While most interviewees expressed a strong preference for the use of organic methods, they shied away from vilifying others who did not share these views. Rather, they seemed to view all farmers, whether conventional or organic, as facing common injustices and sharing challenges.

Taken together, then, the six interviewees who grew up on organic farms all shared deeply-held beliefs in the productivity and environmental soundness of organic practices, as well as in the importance of wider goals such as maintaining a base of small farmers on the land, and cultivating 'local' connections between farmers and consumers. In each case, family upbringing had played a central role in the adoption of such positions. All of them incorporated into their farming practices knowledge they had learned from their parents, and all of them had already been farming organically long before there was a mass market for organic food. Keenly aware from personal experience of the economic barriers that have historically impeded farmers from adopting organic agriculture, these individuals were also especially knowledgeable. While they collectively advocated a radical agrarian politics, they were also careful to qualify their stronger views, as well as discourage uncritical condemnation of conventional farmers.

(ii) Conventional farmers who became organic farmers

In contrast to the farmers who had been raised on organic farms, the decision to pursue organic farming was perhaps a less obvious choice for those who had started out farming conventionally. There were four interviewees who had started out as conventional farmers but for various reasons later became organic farmers. As with the first group, each of these individuals had grown up on a family farm, although in this case conventional farming practices were the ones that had originally taken for granted. Another difference between this group and the first one discussed above, was the more varied set of reasons given by this second group for taking up the practice of farming organically. The two main reasons cited among them for adopting organic farming were the desire to get away from pesticides and the ambition to enter the organic niche market. I will briefly describe the respective paths each of these farmers followed in becoming organic.

The first of this group interviewed was "Jane". One topic I discussed early on with Jane was the cause of her switch from conventional to organic methods. She described how initially it was her own "intuitive" sense of the risks of using pesticides that gave her the impulse to begin seeking alternatives:

The grower's guide put out by the Ministry of Agriculture said things like to sprinkle the carrots with powder fungicide when you planted them, and to spray them on emergence and every ten days thereafter. Well, pretty quick I thought there's got to be a better way.

In spite of her "quick" realization, however, it is notable that Jane did not commit exclusively to using organic methods until the emergence of certification created the incentive for her to do so:

I won't say that I never used any sprays prior to being certified. If it meant saving the crop then I would use it. But then the company we were doing salads with, they were selling to restaurants and wanted us to certify. They wanted us to grow only organic so we did that.

Jane's switch to organic methods was caused by a combination of her aversion to pesticides and the particular regulatory demands of the market. Though a strong supporter of the organic method, her commitment to organic principles appeared to be somewhat less rigid than that of the interviewees from the first group. While she lauded the merits of organic principles, and had even helped to develop BCARA's original organic standard, she was at the same time convinced that, in practice, economics limits the degree to which farmers can realistically commit to those same principles. She lamented the power of the dollar in capitalism, and believed that the organic movement's abandonment of its radical roots is a practical inevitability. Beyond these views about the economic system, however, lied the plain fact that Jane was just not as ardent about organic ideals as other interviewees were. Jane's non-radical sentiment showed that even pioneer organic farmers do not necessarily all share the same views. For instance, when I asked her to describe the main differences she saw between organic and conventional agriculture, she responded that she was not a "fanatic" like some others who "take it too far".

The second interviewee raised on a conventional farm, "Wendy", originally started out growing conventionally but later moved into organics when she found it was profitable to do so. More than any other interviewee, Wendy cited profitability as the driving motive behind her switch. As a grower with a lot of land, she was at first skeptical that it would be possible to manage it all organically. After enough

experimentation, however, she was pleasantly surprised to find that organic methods could be just as effective as conventional ones:

You rely on mother nature a little more, for sure. But surprisingly, when you're not depending on chemicals mother nature takes care of you.

She then went on to explain how using organic methods had allowed her to rejuvenate a newly acquired parcel of land that had formerly been in such poor shape that no one else had wanted to farm it. As with Jane (but in contrast to most farmers I interviewed), Wendy was not particularly anxious to cast herself as 'committed' to organic principles. Instead, her attitude was highly pragmatic. Nevertheless, she did express enthusiasm for the practical merits of organic farming, which she described as more "sustainable" than conventional farming.

Another farmer, "Paul", related his experience of an environmentalist revelation of sorts that had led to his adoption of organic methods. For him, the turning point came when he began developing a disturbing reaction to the pesticides he was using:

I was starting to develop a reaction from using pesticides. My arm would get red, and I felt it inching up my arm. The spray would drift. I just felt there was a better way to farm than overloading the land with chemicals.

Taking his arm as a sign of a wider problem, Paul quickly came to see conventional methods as having a negative impact on both himself and on the environment more generally. In the years following, he became very active in the organic community and went on, along with Jane, Anne, and others, to help develop the organic standard for BCARA. As the organic movement grew and changed, he became increasingly concerned about the factors impeding small organic farmers:

I really lament that people have left organic farming because they are the ones who wanted to be alternative and they had their butts kicked. There hasn't been a support system to sustain small farmers. [...] From 1986 to 2000, which was the

major growth period, many farms tried and failed. Some who quit were so dedicated and doing quality work, and they helped the industry so much.

As a graduate of the agricultural sciences program at UBC, Paul was especially knowledgeable about economic issues, and gave many examples during our conversation of how certification standards work against small growers. He detailed, for example, how the cost of becoming certified in BC is significantly more burdensome for small farmers than it is for larger ones. It seemed that Paul's transition to organic farming took on a greater political significance for him than was the case for either Jane or Wendy. Paul embraced the potential of organic agriculture to reform conventional food provision, and particularly through his enduring involvement in the drafting and amendment of standards, continued to apply himself toward that end.

The final grower who grew up on a conventional farm was "Joe". His background was unique within the second group in that he had grown up on a farm that actually employed a mix of both conventional and organic techniques. Although, technically, he had started out as a conventional producer, he had always made use of organic techniques. However it was only after he realized that his farming practices were very similar to those required of farmers under organic standards, however, that he began to think of himself as an 'organic' farmer:

When I first got into [organic farming], when I heard about it, I thought it wasn't too much different from what we'd been doing. Originally on our farm we always grew things basically organic although we used chemical fertilizers once in a while.

Although Joe was committed to organic farming principles, his decision to become certified had been driven mostly by the fact that he could make more money by doing so. Getting certified was mostly a matter of paperwork for him since, as he says in the quote, he was already close to meeting the requirements prescribed under organic standards.

Joe's case is instructive because it points towards the ambiguity of the line separating 'organic' from 'conventional' practices, and thus raises the important question of what criteria should determine how practices are classified under organic certification standards. Even though Joe had always preferred to use organic recycling techniques over conventional fertilizers, he did not see his practices as 'organic' until the 'official' criteria of certification provided him with a perspective through which to evaluate his own practices.

The interviewees who became organic farmers after having already been conventional farmers were a diverse group. The most notable characteristic of this group in contrast to the first (and the third as I will explain next) was the rather apolitical terms within which most of them contextualized organic agriculture. While they acknowledged the many benefits of organic agriculture, overall they were less focused on its potential as a social movement. Hence the rhetoric of agrarianism that characterized the responses of the first group of interviewees was less pronounced among this second group.

This second group was distinct also in the fact that there were fewer similarities among its members than was the case with the other two groups. Whereas Wendy had become organic mainly to earn better profits, Paul's main motivation had been to get away from pesticides. In Jane's case it had been a combination of both of these factors. Though it was usually in order to escape an undesirable aspect of conventional farming that had led these three individuals to adopt organic methods, in each case the use of organic methods increased the farmer's appreciation of their practical benefits. Joe's case was different because he had already been a nearly-organic farmer. The diversity of this

second group contrasts with the comparatively consistent experiences and views of the first group, and even more strongly with those of the third group.

(iii) Organic farmers from non-farming backgrounds

The remaining four other interviewees did not come from family farming backgrounds, but were rather first generation farmers who had taken up organic farming to pursue an agrarian lifestyle. Each person in this group expressed deeply-held beliefs about the importance of practicing small-scale agriculture. These beliefs were as adamant as those of the interviewees in the first group, who had all grown up on organic farms. Perhaps because it was through their own unique personal experiences that each of them had become committed to organic farming principles (and to agrarian ideals more generally), the farmers in the third group were collectively even more consistently radical than those in the first. Whereas interviewees in the first group had been raised living agrarian lifestyles on organic farms, those in the third group became organic farmers through their own individual processes of psychological transformation.

Agricultural politics was the central preoccupation of "Jim". A carpenter by trade, Jim took up farming when he grew weary of city life. While explaining his reasons for making this transition, he often criticized the "unsustainability" of contemporary society and described in detail the agricultural issues he saw at the heart of this problem. Since organic agriculture seemed to offer a viable solution to many of the issues that troubled him, he viewed his decision to become an organic farmer in terms of social activism:

Altruistically, I felt that there was a need for this kind of farming operation to be in close proximity to Vancouver, and I felt that if we could do it as an example, then we could effect change by example so that other people would do the same thing, thereby helping to clean the earth.

For Jim, starting an organic farm represented a decision to take responsibility for how his own personal actions impacted the environment. Following through on his ambitions, he went on to many notable achievements. Originally inexperienced in farming matters, year by year Jim developed his own intensive style of organic farming through trial and error and with the help of other farmers he met. At the time of interview, he cultivated 96 varieties of crops on six acres. He was a founding member of BCARA and was very involved in the creation of organic certification standards in his region. Jim was opinionated and articulate, and expressed a dedication to organic ideals that was among the most emphatic of any of my interviewees.

The experiences and attitudes of "Patty" were very similar to those of Jim. She was also a city dweller turned farmer. In her younger days she had gone to San Francisco in pursuit of the "freedom" of an urban lifestyle only to find her excitement give way to despair when "buying fancy clothes and expensive handbags" began to ring hollow:

I was getting very lonely, and even though I was surrounding myself with material possessions, I had lost touch and I didn't belong to a community anymore.

Patty's experience of urban alienation left her wanting to return to her roots living among a tight-knit community. She took an interest in living on the land, and eventually got married and started a small family farm in the Fraser Valley where she has been ever since. Perhaps because of her own personal experiences growing up, Patty was very interested in drawing attention to the limited appreciation she thought many people have for the politics of food. During the interview she was very critical of the industrialization of food provision, and stressed the importance of educating other farmers as well as the public about alternatives such as organic agriculture. She warned of the growing

influence of corporate power in the organic sector and condemned the lack of support given to small organic producers by most grocery chains.

Again, a change in perspective explained how "Jill" found her way to organic farming. Like Paul, she had been schooled in conventional agriculture at university. A very energetic speaker, Jill later experienced a sort of personal paradigm shift that led her to follow the tenets of organic agriculture instead:

I studied agriculture and I was really indoctrinated into the whole conventional scene. You know I thought growth hormone in dairy cows was a great idea because it increases milk production and so I kind of had all that implanted into me. But after I finished college I worked overseas for quite a while, it was five years in southern Africa, and I discovered a whole different way of doing things and I also encountered some pretty nasty chemicals, like pesticides that were available over the counter that had been banned in other countries. And I taught agriculture so I had students who, in order to pass their exams, had to spray pesticides on their crops because they lost points for holes in the leaves of their chard. So I looked at that and began to see, you know, this is a little odd, it's a little strange, it tastes fine if it has holes in it. And then I also met somebody who's involved in permaculture, which was one of the first connections I made with organic agriculture, and he was doing amazing work growing food in the desert with people. So from then on I was just interested in it and the more I learned about it the more realized that this is the only way to do it.

Jill used words like "indoctrinated" and "implanted" to make her point that the choice a farmer makes to practice conventional or organic agriculture is in many ways an ideological one. Her example of the school where students had to use dangerous pesticides "that had been banned in other countries" to avoid losing points for having holes in their chard illustrated this point well. Like Jim and Patty, then, it was through personal experience that she came to view organic farming as "the only way to do it".

Like some in the first group of interviewees, those in the third group described themselves as wholly committed to organic farming principles and claimed to farm in a manner that went beyond the minimum requirements of certification. And like most

other interviewees in general, they were interested in the connections between agricultural practice and society at large, conceptualizing organic farming not only as something they did for themselves, but also for the good of society and the earth as a kind of political action.

These brief sketches of these three groups illustrate the many different paths the interviewees took in becoming organic farmers. While the interviews I conducted were coloured by stories unique to each farmer, as I have shown, common themes nevertheless emerged over the course of the interviews. By and large, the farmers shared many sentiments about the practical advantages of farming organically, the common economic challenges faced by both organic and conventional farmers, and the importance of educating the public about agricultural politics. Though some were more enthusiastic about the notion of the organic movement than others, all of them showed a common appreciation not only for the practical merits of organic farming, but also for its significance as a symbol of positive change toward more sustainable agriculture.

Because the majority of interviewees have been a part of BC's organic community for fifteen years or more, many of them were not only familiar with one another, but had also often shared previous experiences together, such as drafting standards or forming co-operatives, that united them with the sense of a common identity. That I interviewed veteran farmers rather than novice ones was no accident, for as I stated earlier my goal from the outset was to focus my research using the experiences and perspectives of farmers with long-term involvement in the organic community. While there are today hundreds of organic growers in BC, most of them are newer farmers who came in during

the 1990s after pioneers such as those I interviewed had already laid the groundwork for organic certification and the organic movement in general.

Due to the influential role they played as founders of the organic movement in BC, I draw particularly on the interviews with farmers who helped write the original organic standards for BCARA and SOOPA. As the two earliest certifying bodies in BC, their centrality in establishing the regulatory structures instrumental to the rapid proliferation of organic agriculture during the 1990s cannot be overlooked. By doing the ground work developing their own independent organic standards, they provided examples that others would later consult during the formation of regional certifying bodies.

1.4 Methodological Challenges

Interviewing the farmers presented a number of challenges. One was the conflict I felt between wanting to get as much detailed and specific information from them as possible, and wanting to respect their privacy at the same time. Although the interviewees were notified in advance of the general nature of the issues I was planning to discuss with them, I knew that some of my questions had the potential to make them feel uncomfortable. Though I wanted to address the ideological standpoints from which the farmers participated in the organic movement, at the same time I did not want the interviewees to feel that I was prying into their personal lives. For instance, one area of discussion I was particularly interested in exploring was how, from the farmers' respective perspectives, the organic movement had or had not been affected as a result of commercialization. Because organic farmers have a clear interest in constructing a positive image of organic agriculture, I thought this topic might make interviewees fear

that I was trying to 'debunk' the organic movement. While asking questions about this subject, I tried my best not to give them the impression that I had preconceived notions of what organic farmers should believe in. I did not want to inadvertently cue them to offer responses based on their perceptions of my own views or expectations. I did not want them to think, for instance, that I expected 'real' organic farmers to conform to 'back-to-the-land' stereotypes.

Fortunately, I found that all of the interviewees were very open to my questions, at least most of the time. Their frankness made it easy to clarify unclear aspects of our discussions. Interviews were often followed by further, open-ended conversational exploration of the issues that had engaged each farmer the most. This practice helped me to establish early on a sense of which interview questions were most relevant from the perspective of the farmers.

The data I collected presented a few different limitations. First, since the number of farmers I interviewed was relatively small, this study offers only a snapshot of the characteristics of BC organic farmers as a group. While the farmers I interviewed were very experienced and readily able to describe their views on both the pros and the cons of how the organic movement has changed throughout the years, their perspectives were nevertheless distinctly their own, and it would be a mistake to generalize them to other farmers I did not interview. Furthermore, some pioneer organic farmers declined to be interviewed. Would their accounts and views have clashed in some way with those of farmers who had agreed to be interviewed? How was my research shaped as a result of the omission of their views?

Even if I had been able to speak with every single organic grower in BC, the fact would remain that everything presented in this thesis has organized according to my own point of view. Setting out to write the thesis on the basis of my interviews has been challenging. I collected a lot of information, and a way to integrate it all was not self-evident. The interviews I conducted were usually an hour or more in length, many of them full of statements I wanted to quote. My interviewees had all contributed unique insights, and while they often held similar views, I wanted to make sure not to overlook the differences of opinion they had expressed.

Secondly, because most farmers I interviewed saw themselves as radical agriculturalists, it is uncertain whether their responses were at times chosen strategically with the intent to co-opt my position as a researcher as a way of delivering their views to a wider audience. Were the responses I collected exaggerated to bolster the organic movement's image in my eyes? As noted earlier, it seemed that some interviewees went to greater pains than others to cast the practice of organic agriculture in an ethical light. While some, such as Jim and Anne, were markedly focused on decrying the various factors undermining the true fulfillment of organic ideals, others, such as Jane and Wendy, clearly had less personal investment in upholding the radical heritage of the organic movement. More often than not, though, interviewees freely acknowledged their biases to help me understand where they stood politically. So while Jill and Anne both described themselves as "fanatics" to emphasize that they believed in organic principles to a point that went beyond what many people might think is necessary, Anne went out of her way to state more than once during our conversation that she was not a "fanatic" like "some people" in the organic community.

While I am personally willing to accept that the responses I gathered were given in good faith, it is impossible to know the extent to which the farmers might have seen my interviews as an opportunity to market themselves. Many of them commented at some point about how media representations shape public opinion of organic agriculture. Three of them, for instance, independently noted the strongly negative media attention that had been stirred up in BC following the airing of the February 4th, 2000 edition of the popular American investigative journalism program, 20/20, which presented critics who argued that organic farming represented a threat to food security because it is unproductive, damaging to the environment, and poses the danger of E. coli contamination. Sensitive to the power of the media, the interviewees may have seen their interviews with me as an opportunity to appropriate a piece of the public arena for themselves. If this was the case, the farmers were nevertheless overt about their political views. Since agricultural radicalism was the exact issue I wanted to investigate, rather than view this as a problem, I welcomed the zealous opinions they sometimes offered.

Furthermore, the views they presented were usually well-rounded and enabled me to gain insight into both positive and negative aspects of the way BC's organic movement has developed. Indeed, while the farmers were enthusiastic about their movement, they were equally cynical towards it, and often referred to a gulf between what organic agriculture had once stood for in the early days, and what it has come to represent in more recent times as more actors have joined the organic sector in pursuit of profit.

Finally, at times some interviewees said things they did not want me to repeat beyond the privacy of our conversations. Typically this would happen when they wanted to criticize a specific farmer or group of farmers they saw as responsible for perpetuating

trends that they felt undermined the movement. While most interviewees were reluctant to blame specific individuals, many believed that new organic farmers were not as versed in organic methods or dedicated to organic principles as they 'should' be.

I have attempted to represent the information gleaned from my interviews in a way that highlights the political limitations of the organic movement. I read organic agriculture in BC as a social movement, and interpret the interviews I conducted with farmers as discursive expressions of that movement. I emphasize the criticisms interviewees made of the economic conventions, regulatory schemes, and farming practices they described as impeding the realization of radical agrarian ideals. That I have chosen to do so reflects my own bias. As I stated above, in looking at the case of organic agriculture in BC, I wanted to gain a better appreciation of how this form of alternative agriculture both does and does not pose a challenge to the dominant paradigm of conventional agriculture. Historically, organic agricultural movements arose out of opposition to the 'profit motive' that drove conventional agriculture (Howard, 1947; Belasco, 1993), yet it has actually been through rapid commercial expansion that organic agriculture has recently gained public recognition in BC and elsewhere. Since the time I began this project, the word 'organic' has been appearing with greater and greater frequency. In natural foods and mainstream grocery stores, at farmers' markets, in advertisements, and in magazine and newspaper articles, the concept of the organic-foods-buying ethical consumer has become ubiquitous. Buying organic food is portrayed as a failsafe way for consumers to live healthier lives and to ameliorate the various economic and environmental woes caused by conventional agriculture.

Chapter 3 - Comparing Agricultural Paradigms

In this chapter I give some background about the histories of conventional and organic agriculture respectively. These histories require comment because they constitute the broader context in which the specific topic of my research is situated. Furthermore, interviewees made frequent reference to the oppositions separating 'conventional' and 'organic' agriculture. A brief reflection on the main philosophical tenets and practical characteristics of these two types of agriculture will help the reader to better grasp the scope of meanings farmers were alluding to when discussing them.

1.1 Conventional Agriculture

What is referred to today as 'conventional' agriculture was not 'invented' in any exact place or time. Rather, it is an approach to farming that was developed slowly through the gradual assimilation of many different ideas throughout the years. Following momentous breakthroughs in fertilizer manufacturing made during the 19th century, the 20th century saw an amazing proliferation of complementary technologies geared toward the industrialization of agriculture. In the following, I will give a brief historical account of the development of conventional agriculture. This account will show how conventional agriculture came to be associated with the practical and ideological traits that characterize it today.

During the 19th century, it became accepted wisdom among many scientists that the secrets of soil fertility could be explained entirely with reference to the principles of chemistry (Conford, 2001). This thinking was initiated in the 1840s by the German Justus von Liebig when he advanced his radical new theory of the 'limiting factor'. This theory held that crop productivity was limited solely by the lack of availability in the soil

of any of the various chemical elements necessary for plant growth. Von Liebig argued that soil was nothing more than "lifeless storage bins filled with pulverized rocks, which held water and nutrients and which farmers stirred in tillage" (quoted in Bookchin, 1962:19). Hoping to develop powerful new fertilizers that would boost productivity in places such as Germany and Britain, where nascent forms of capitalist agriculture were rapidly depleting soil fertility, he hypothesized before the British Association of Science in 1840 that it would be possible to manufacture phosphorus fertilizer on a large scale by reacting phosphate with sulphuric acid (Foster, 2002). This hypothesis was soon pursued successfully by the British scientist John Bennet Lawes who obtained a patent in 1842 for his method of superphosphate synthesis, opening the door for the first time to industrial fertilizer manufacturing (Conford, 2001). It was not long after this breakthrough that many more new experiments in fertilizer synthesis were undertaken, and in the ensuing decades many different processes for manufacturing fertilizers were successfully developed. As quickly as they were developed, manufactured fertilizers were brought into use by farmers in industrialized countries.

At the same time as these new fertilizers were introduced, the first 'organic' critiques also emerged. The 'humus farming' movement decried the ideas of von Liebig, insisting that living organic matter played a vital role in regenerating soil fertility that could not be replaced simply by substituting chemical inputs (Conford, 2001). But while this movement's emphasis on the importance of adhering to biologically-grounded means of soil management would be echoed by like-minded movements in the future, at the time these dissenting voices were largely ignored as 'soil amendment' using manufactured fertilizers became the new orthodoxy. As a form of primary production, farming is

affected directly by capricious environmental variables, and as such it is an activity that has historically proven especially resistant to industrial appropriation. Chemical management of the soil, however, represented a decisive step toward what would later become an overtly modernist project to use science and technology to control all natural conditions affecting agricultural production.

'Conventional' agriculture would later become a highly capital-intensive approach characterized by the use of monocultural cropping patterns, hybrid seeds, heavy machinery, and fossil fuel inputs. A movement away from biological energy sources to the geological energy source of oil has been a hallmark of its development historically (Jackson, 1985). Whereas traditional agricultures had relied on labour-intensive techniques that recycled biological energy on site and maintained humus content in the soil⁵, the 20th century saw a widespread movement toward so-called 'scientific' techniques centred around the use of petroleum-based fertilizers bought from off-farm sources. During the late 19th century, such fertilizers lessened the need to use biological recycling techniques to maintain soil fertility. By the turn of the century, dozens of new agricultural machineries were being introduced, and to maximize their efficient use, farmers began to specialize in producing greater volumes of fewer crops. In time, monoculture became the dominant pattern of cultivation in industrialized countries, causing the use of such machineries to become endemic to agricultural landscapes. This new paradigm represented a sort of 'industrial revolution' in agriculture where science and technology were used to push farming to much larger scales than had ever been achieved before (Goodman et al, 1987).

⁵ Such techniques included cover cropping, intercropping, crop rotating, composting, manuring, and so on.

By the 1920s, technological optimism had become a new status quo of agricultural politics as some governments began to explore the possible economic advantages of promoting large-scale agriculture. State agricultural planning became especially bold in the US and the USSR. Top-down management removed agency from farmers as state experts set new prescriptions for farming practices. This usually entailed the abandonment of 'traditional' labour-intensive methods in favour of 'modern' capital-intensive, technologically-oriented ones. As new technologies were introduced, they were integrated with previously existing ones to maximize productivity while minimizing labour. By the 1930s, technological packages designed to combine new mechanical, chemical, and genetic innovations were made available to American farmers by agricultural extension agents (Goodman et al, 1987). The 'rational', uniform landscapes of the huge monocultures that resulted from state planning typified the modernist aesthetic of the precise control of nature (Scott, 1998). The promotion of this 'modern' form of agriculture as official agricultural policy signified the arrival of a new 'productivist' ideology where increasing yields was seen as the only valid goal. Political tendencies favouring the productivist approach to farming became especially prevalent after World War II as governments sought to increase their economic power through agricultural growth. Politicians and agronomists from the United States and Russia were so eager to transform agriculture into a totally mechanized industry that even in spite of the onset of the Cold War, tours to modern farms in one another's countries were nevertheless arranged: "the rationalization of farming on a huge, even national, scale was part of a faith shared by social engineers and agricultural planners throughout the world. And they were conscious of being engaged in a common endeavour" (Scott, 1998:196).

The attraction of agricultural productivism had become so great that even these enemies had found reason to work together "to create a new world of large-scale, rational, industrial agriculture..." (Scott, 1998:197). It is this political heritage that informed the development of a 'modern' industrial form of agriculture that is now taken for granted as 'conventional'. But as I mentioned earlier, pundits of influences have always drawn their critics. I will now briefly mention some of the arguments that began being made against conventional agriculture in more recent times.

The goal of increasing productivity saw the development of a variety of new technologies with radical capacities to simplify and remake farm environments. New machines, fertilizers, pesticides, and hybrid seeds facilitated amazing increases in yields and farm sizes. Yet such technological introductions did not represent pure advances, but rather trade-offs in that they always brought both positive and negative consequences. Machinery saved time and labour, but was extremely expensive and compacted the soil when used; fertilizers stimulated plant growth, but depleted soil and contaminated water; pesticides controlled troublesome insects, but also caused insect resistance, killed beneficial ones, and poisoned farmworkers; hybridized seeds increased productivity, but weakened genetic resistance to diseases (Carson, 1962; Fukuoka, 1978). Industrializing agricultural production had been both a boon and a bane, and the enthusiasm with which conventional agriculture was promoted in the immediate postwar period was soon matched by the bitterness of its detractors.

By the 1960s and 1970s, it had become evident that the price of apparent 'progress' in agriculture was the creation of unforeseen problems. Writers such as Rachel Carson and Wendell Berry drew attention to the negative ecological and social effects of

conventional agriculture and helped to inspire the modern environmental movement. But in spite of mounting opposition to conventional agriculture at this time, alternatives such as organic agriculture remained ignored by government (Belasco, 1989). In part this was because standard economic models had been constructed around the assumption that modern agriculture was inherently rational. This created the perception that if farmers were leaving the land, it must have been because they were not being efficient enough. In fact, the overriding thinking of the day was that the most advanced agriculture would be one where the need for human labour was virtually eliminated (Scott, 1998). Upheaval in the countryside was thus rationalized dogmatically by agricultural bureaucrats who saw any "economic crisis as simply another adjustment in the economic system of agriculture" (Friedland, 1991:11). Even when American farmers in the 1970s were experiencing an economic crisis that was compared to the Great Depression in the 1930s, "agricultural economists were paradigmatically unable to confront the post-1973 crisis since their hegemonic model was based on neoclassical economics" (Friedland, 1991:11). If the dictates of supply and demand entailed a growing trend of farmer bankruptcy, it was viewed not as a problem, but as a step in the 'rational' evolution of agriculture.

The celebration of higher yields achieved using conventional methods belied the swift emergence of new problems they invited as increasing productivity steadily intensified competition in agricultural markets, creating a perpetual crisis where farmers were, and continue to be, forced to invest more in desperation to generate greater volumes of crops each year just to stay in business (Rosset and Altieri, 1997; Jackson, 1985). As input costs have increased and prices declined, farmers have struggled

continually against a devastating cost-price squeeze. To cope with these difficult conditions, farmers typically incur deeper debt, expand the scale of production, and cut corners in terms of environmental management in the attempt to quickly boost yields (Norberg-Hodge et al, 1993). But as competition increases the capital-intensity of farming, farmers flounder under economic pressure. Overproduction in the postwar period has resulted in a massive depopulation of farming communities in the US (Berry, 1977).

In 1968, the Canadian federal government assembled a Task Force on Agriculture to investigate its farm problem. The Task Force issued a report in 1969 documenting widespread discontent among Canadian farmers due to low farm incomes, overproduction, shrinking markets, and falling prices. The solution it recommended, however, was to liberalize markets. The rationale was that exposing farmers to more competitive pressure would force them to grow bigger and become more efficient. This advice reflected an uncompromising ideological commitment to productivist agriculture where the elimination of small farmers was viewed as a necessary step to achieve progress. To quote from the report:

Individual farm enterprises must continuously expand and improve efficiency to maintain or increase incomes. Unfortunately, many farmers have too small earnings to be able to save or justify borrowing in the competitive race, even though they make some improvements in productivity (Federal Task Force on Agriculture, 1969:21).

The report condemned those who "were loathe to recognize the need for a widespread exodus from farming", and stated that as many as two-thirds of Canadian farmers should be encouraged to leave the land so that those remaining could reap higher profits (Federal Task Force on Agriculture, 1969:31-32).

In the 1970s, some organizations devoted to addressing sustainable agriculture issues emerged in Canada. While these organizations were small, mostly volunteer-run, and oriented to local issues, they "did have an impact on the media and the public consciousness" (McRae, 1990). In the 1980s, the sustainable agriculture movement gained more ground. Issues such as global warming, ozone depletion, and the loss of biodiversity became highly publicized, stirring a general "growth in environmental sentiment" throughout North America that contributed to a rising awareness of agricultural sustainability issues (Buttel, 1993). Early and still influential alternative agriculture organizations in the US, such as the Land Institute and the Rodale Institute, began exploring sustainable agriculture and introduced the concept to a wider audience through new publications. In Canada, many new organizations emerged, some of which began to gain "a greater degree of influence over public policy" (McRae, 1990). As sustainability issues have become more pressing, the need to discuss alternatives has grown stronger.

Today organic agriculture stands as the most prolific form of alternative agriculture. It is a rapidly growing segment of agricultural economies in many countries, and has a much more developed regulatory infrastructure than any other form of alternative agriculture. In the following, I will review the philosophical tenets and history of organic agriculture to show why it is so often seen as the diametric opposite of conventional agriculture.

1.2 Organic Agriculture

In contrast with the creed 'get big or get out' (Berry, 1977) and according tendencies toward 'giantism' characteristic of conventional agriculture, the ideal of organic agriculture is to farm in a manner that is totally integrated with local ecosystems and local people. Understood as a set of farming practices alternative to those used in conventional agriculture, organic agriculture is often defined according to what it is not: "its main characteristics are the constraints of zero use of chemical pesticides and artificial fertilizers" (Oelhaf, 1978:124).

The central distinction between conventional and organic agriculture lies in their contrasting approaches to soil management. These, in turn, reflect contrasting theories about the physical relationship between soil and crop production. As I explained above, the philosophical framework of conventional agriculture is steeped in mechanistic ideas such as von Liebig's position that soil is lifeless and inert, and that chemistry rather than biology is the correct discipline through which agriculture should be studied. Following this view, fertilizer application becomes the main tool of soil management. In contrast, organic agriculture views soil as a living, active medium that constantly interacts with plants. Its founding proponents reasoned that healthy crops are a function of the organic content of soil, and that practices helping to recycle and conserve organic matter are the best means of ensuring soil fertility (Howard, 1940; Balfour, 1950). While it is important to promote an appropriate ratio of sand, silt, and clay, and to sustain an abundance of minerals in the soil, the continual regeneration of organic matter that will maintain living microbial constituents and humus content in the soil is equally if not more important (Zimmer, 2000).

Rather than being composed of 'lifeless storage bins', then, from the organic perspective the soil is a dynamic ecosystem where symbiotic relationships essential to healthy plant growth must be cultivated. In contrast with the conventional use of fertilizers to 'feed' plants in lieu of rich soil content, "organic farmers seek to feed the plants *indirectly*. They feed the soil life with compost and other natural materials, and the microbes in turn feed the plants" (Oelhaf, 1978:113, emphasis original). Hence, in organic farming, soil management is regarded as a biological, rather than solely chemical issue. It is arguable that using chemical inputs to amend soil deficiencies is actually less efficient than using techniques that encourage biodiversity and recycle biological energy already present in soil. This is because, rather than becoming integrated into the complexities of the soil ecosystem, chemical fertilizers are often either taken up by plants too quickly or leached into groundwater (Norberg-Hodge et al, 1993). But in order for the minerals and nutrients key to growth to be taken up by a plant, fixation must occur through a symbiotic interaction between roots and fungi. Feeding plants directly stimulates rapid plant growth, but in so doing bypasses the biological relationships necessary to the maintenance of soil health, thereby causing the soil to become less fit for growing healthy plants in the future (Howard, 1940; Pank, 1976).

Biodiversity is a key tenet of organic farming. Maintaining diversity in crop varieties and insect populations, for instance, are two important ways that organic farmers exploit ecological interactions to 'subsidize' production. Planting and rotating a variety of crops each year cycles nutrients, but also provides non-chemical checks against weeds and pests (Jackson, 1980; Soule & Piper, 1992). Altieri (1995) contends that cross-cultural comparisons of agriculture show that farming systems which employ the three

key practices of cover cropping, recycling organic matter on-farm, and using some means of biological pest control are the most ecologically regenerative; organic farming is one example of a system of farming that makes use of these three practices.

I would add that another ingredient is key: the know-how of the farmer. To take best advantage of organic techniques requires a great deal of tacit knowledge gained from experience (Fukuoka, 1978). It is up to each farmer to become familiar with the physical characteristics of their land, to observe its species and all the ecological interactions and seasonal patterns that take place there. Only by becoming familiar with the local agroecosystem can a farmer gain the opportunity to manage ecological relationships in ways that improve on-farm energy recycling.

The first half of the 20th century saw a proliferation of alternative agricultural methods that rejected the emerging industrial mode of farming. Each of these new alternatives endorsed the benefits of biodiversified farms managed using a low-input approach, and stood in contrast with the ecologically-degraded monocultures of so-called 'modern' farms. The British botanist Sir Albert Howard was one of the first to present one such alternative. Often credited as the founder of modern organic farming, his innovative work began in 1905 when he travelled to India to study traditional farming methods. What he saw there impressed him so much that he came to regard modern methods as inferior by comparison. Interpreting his observations in India using his background in botany, he developed a refined version of Indian organic composting he dubbed the Indore process. After twenty years, he returned to Britain to publish books (most notably *An Agricultural Testament* in 1940) about Indian agriculture and his Indore

process which later reached a wide international audience disseminated through the Soil Association.

There were many other contributors to early 'organic' thinking. The American Franklin King was another figure who travelled overseas to see what he could learn by observing non-Western traditional agricultures. Based on his experiences, he published *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (1911), a book in which he detailed the 'permanent' farming systems he encountered during time in China, Korea, and Japan. King's collected works inspired a 'complex farming systems' movement that espoused ecologically regenerative farming practices. During the 1920s, the German thinker Rudolph Steiner gave a series of lectures in which he condemned the spiritual depravity of food raised on the 'dead matter' of fertilizers and pesticides. In response, he advocated what others later dubbed 'biodynamic' agriculture, an approach that bears much in common with organic agriculture, but which involves some different techniques, most importantly the application of 'homeopathic' compost teas. It was apparently not until the publication of Lord Northburne's book, *Look to the Land* (1940), however, that the term 'organic farming' was first coined. Northburne chose the term 'organic' to reflect how a farm is like "an 'organism' in which the parts of the farm are orchestrated into a functioning whole - a kind of farming that stands in stark contrast with an industrial farm that relies on input-output mechanisms" (Kirschenmann, 2005). Like the other holistically-minded organic progenitors I have mentioned, Northburne stressed the importance of seeing crop problems as symptomatic of trouble within the farm system in general rather than as discrete occurrences.

In spite of the vast anthropological and scientific evidence demonstrating its effectiveness, organic agriculture has always faced barriers institutionally. For instance, during the early 1930s a number of studies were done that provided experimental evidence of the beneficial effects of organic husbandry on soil health, yet for the most part these were ignored by the scientific community in favour of the prevailing orthodoxy of chemical determinism (Conford, 2001). The first organizations dedicated to the promotion of organic agriculture were founded in the 1940s. This decade saw the establishment of both the Soil Association in the UK, and the Rodale Institute in the US, organizations which remain central to the publication and dissemination of information about organic agriculture. It was also during the 1940s that Hans Muller of Germany formalized the first system of organic certification (Lotter, 2003).

In Canada, institutional promotion of organic agriculture began in the 1950s. Foreign experts exposed Canadian academics to organic agriculture and publications by the Soil Association and the Rodale Institute became available (Hill & McRae, 1992). Founded in 1953, the Canadian Organic Soil Association was the first organic agriculture organization to be established in Canada. Its founder, Christopher Chapman, produced two educational films entitled "Understanding the Living Soil", and "A Sense of Humus".

As support for organic agriculture slowly gathered in the decades to follow, institutional reluctance to support organic agriculture persisted. In response to the publicity garnered by the 'back to the land' movement, former US Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz said in 1971, "We can go back to organic agriculture in this country if we must; we know how to do it. However, before we move in that direction, someone must decide which 50 million of our people will starve!" (quoted in Guthman,

2004:110). The 1970s nevertheless marked the onset of concerted support for organic agriculture around the globe. One important event was the establishment of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements in 1972. This body developed an organic standard that was intended to help people around the world understand organic principles and uphold them in their farming practices.

In Canada, it was the time of a modest yet notable expansion of organic agriculture:

In the 1970s, organic farming organizations were established in six provinces. These held annual conferences, published newsletters and lobbied departments of agriculture. Commercial services and product supply enterprises were established, and the interest in organic gardening grew among urban populations (Hill & McRae, 1992:74).

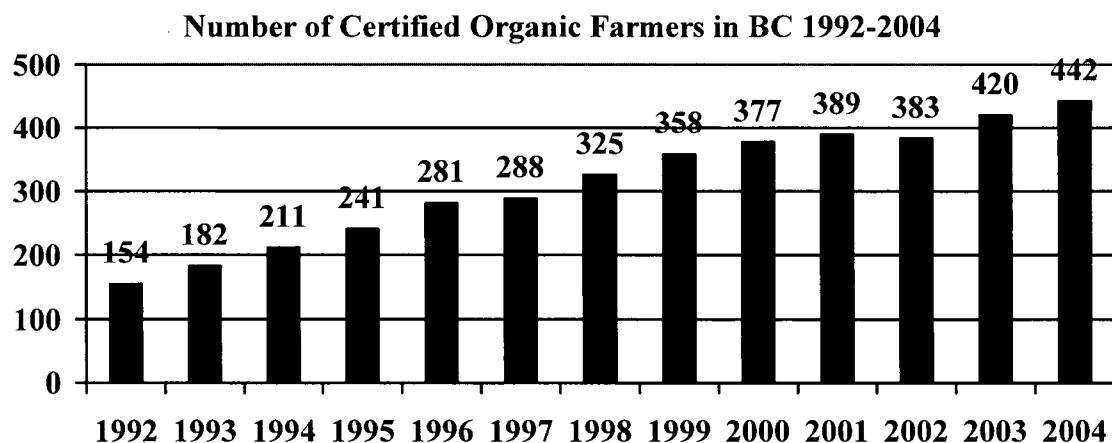
Despite these encouraging developments, indifference to organic agriculture remained. Virtually all government, industry, and research institution support continued to go toward conventional agriculture. It was not until the 1980s that government funding and grants for the study of organic agriculture in Canada started to improve. In the US, too, it was not until the 1980s that organic agriculture first began developing an institutional structure. This was initiated when a combination of the farm crisis, increased environmental concern, and changing consumer tastes spawned wider political support for organic agriculture (Guthman, 2004). Particularly in California, certifying bodies proliferated, trade institutions sprang up, and programs supporting sustainability initiatives were created. Such developments signalled the beginnings of remarkable attitudinal shifts in favour of organic agriculture that were soon to come.

Of particular interest to this study is the emergence of organic agriculture specifically in the BC context. During the 1990s in BC, organic agriculture underwent a dramatic change from being a fringe 'movement' to a profitable 'industry'. Over the past

fifteen years, BC has been a continual hotbed of growth and become an institutional leader of Canada's organic industry.

A study commissioned by COABC found that "over 50% of [British Columbia] grocery shoppers have purchased at least a small amount of organic food during their grocery shopping over the past year" (Winram, 2003:7). Once absent from most grocery stores, organic products can now be found in many stores that have responded to consumer demand for them. Growth in the number of farmers has accompanied this growth in consumption. Between 1992 and 2004, the number of certified organic farmers increased from 154 to 442 (Figure 2)⁶:

Figure 2



In 2004, 2% of all BC farmers were certified organic, representing approximately 27,949 acres under organic production worth an estimated value of \$29.5 million. At the time a further 78 transitional growers were bringing another 5,478 acres under organic production (Macey, 2005).

Soil and climate factors make BC especially fit for cultivating a wide variety of

⁶ Figure 2 adapted from Macey, 2005.

produce such that the province is the leader in organic fruit and vegetable production in Canada. In 2004, nearly 300 organic producers on approximately 1,700 acres of land in BC were producing fruits and nuts. This represented the largest organic fruit acreage in Canada and 3.5% of the total area of fruit acreage in the province (Macey, 2004). Particularly prolific areas include grape production and apple production.⁷ The province also boasted the largest total acreage of organic vegetable production and the highest number of organic vegetable farms in Canada. In 2003, over 200 producers on approximately 2,300 acres were specialized in vegetable production, accounting for about 12% of the total vegetable area in BC (Macey, 2004).

This chapter has covered some of the main reasons why organic and conventional agriculture tend to be seen as opposing 'paradigms'. This view is corroborated not only by the differing approaches taken within the two methods to soil management, pest control, and farm design, but also by the contrasting philosophical tenets each is founded upon. Furthermore, whereas the history of conventional agriculture has been characterized by strong support from government, industry, and research institutions, the history of organic agriculture has been precisely the opposite. In sum, the strategies for successful agriculture they put forward, as well as the visions they hold for the future of agriculture suggest complete differences in 'world view'. In 1977, a famous debate between Earl Butz and farmer-author Wendell Berry saw the two "acknowledging the void between them" with Berry commenting that while he spoke from "values", Secretary Butz spoke from "quantities" (quoted from Beus and Dunlap, 1990:593). As I will discuss next, the history of organic agriculture in BC has indeed been one of struggle to survive in a political economic context dominated by conventional agriculture. In the

⁷ These represented 5% and 7% of the total provincial grape and apple areas respectively.

following chapter, I will use the words of organic farmers themselves to show how their collectively-held radical agrarian values spurred them to develop the first organic certifying bodies in hopes of advancing organic agriculture as an alternative to conventional agriculture.

Chapter 4 - Foundations of the Organic Movement in BC

1.1 Motivations of 'Pioneer' Organic Farmers

There is an academic consensus that while modern social movements often exhibit common traits, specificities of context ultimately make each unique (Teske and Tetreault, 2000). Accordingly, this chapter will provide background information about the rise of organic agriculture in BC that will help me to contextualize and discuss its goals, successes, and shortcomings as a social movement opposed to conventional agriculture. With reference to statements collected during interviews, I will introduce three important goals that motivated pioneer organic farmers to found certification as a means of advancing the organic movement. These goals were: to change the culturally derisive image of organic farmers; to promote the ecological principles of organic farming; and to challenge the economic and political conditions that reinforced conventional agriculture at the expense of alternatives.

Because the "primary power of social movements is discursive, that is, it lies substantially in their ability to challenge dominant perspectives" (Allen, 2004:6), looking at these themes will highlight the social meanings interviewees invested in 'organic' as a symbol, and give insight into what they hoped to achieve through the creation of certification standards. Critical of the destructiveness of conventional agriculture, movement pioneers valued organic farming for its ecologically regenerative qualities, and believed that other farmers should too. As I will discuss later, in this chapter, the founding of certification standards was their attempt to spread these beliefs among other farmers by making organic farming more accessible and profitable. Since organic farming usually entails more labour per unit area than conventional farming, the creation

of organic certification was intended to provide the economic security of higher prices for organic growers. Understanding through their own words why these farmers took it upon themselves to organize collectively will provide a basis for assessing how well they have achieved their goals by pursuing market-based expansion.

(i) Cultural derision of organic farmers

Especially before the days of certification, those choosing to practice organic farming were (and sometimes continue to be) personally criticized for their 'backward' methods. Until relatively recently, organic farmers were largely invisible in BC. The perception of conventional agriculture as the 'normal' way to farm caused organic farming to appear obsolete not only to the food industry and government, but also to farmers. Organic farmers were seen as either hopelessly naïve or dogmatically traditional. This climate of cultural disregard shaped the experiences of early organic farmers.

"Glen", a founding member of SOOPA, was the most experienced organic farmer of anyone I interviewed, and his knowledge of the formative days of the organic movement was extensive. He had much to say about cultural stereotypes against organic farmers:

I have been called more than once a peasant farmer [...] The conventional packing houses where we used to send our cherries would spray them with a fungicide just before they went into a plastic bag. They didn't give a damn that we were organic or not. We wanted to prove it to ourselves that we could do it organically because everybody told us we couldn't. We were against industrial agriculture and its whole paradigm in marketing.

The ire in Glen's words suggests that the denigration of being called a "peasant farmer" only served to strengthen his commitment to farming organically. His description shows that the challenges facing early organic farmers were in many ways cultural ones. The

packing houses "didn't give a damn", and "everybody" said that trying to be successful farming organically was an unrealistic goal. Because people accepted the post-harvest use of fungicides as normal, those who challenged this practice were perceived as weirdos. Consequently, 'organic' food was not recognized as a value-added product, and organic farmers most often had to resort to selling their products through conventional distributors. Regulations guaranteeing the separation of 'conventional' from 'organic' products throughout the supply chain did not yet exist, and organic products sold beyond direct marketing were not labelled as such. Selling through distributors erased the difference between conventional and organic products and thwarted organic farmers hopes of garnering premium returns or supplying consumers with a 'pure' product.

Today organic agriculture is a high-growth niche industry, yet derision of organic farmers continues. Joe described the discouraging comments he receives on a regular basis for being an organic farmer:

There's one farmer down the road, he comes over and laughs at us and says "I've used chemicals and sprays all my life and it's never hurt me." It's just a different way of thinking. I guess since World War II people thought they'd feed the world through chemicals and pesticides. It's just a different state of mind. My brother in law, he's been a farmer all his life and he thinks we're nuts. [Joe]

Joe's neighbour "laughs at" him, and even his brother thinks he is "nuts". Commercial success has not converted all skeptics, and the "state of mind" that organic farming will never be enough to "feed the world" remains. A basic challenge for organic farmers, and for the movement more generally, has always been the problem of how to persuade others of the validity of organic methods, and of people's right to choose their use.

Other interviewees had also experienced being judged negatively due to stereotypes of organic farmers. While Glen's organic products had been contaminated by

indifferent distributors, and Joe's organic practices dismissed by his fellow farmers, Anne, Jane, and Paul all talked about the derision they had experienced in their dealings with the provincial marketing boards. Back in the early 1990s, just as more farmers were becoming certified in BC, the three of them had gone together to the provincial marketing boards in an attempt to gain support for building the nascent organic niche market, but were turned away. Following this, they and others went on to develop the organic sector independently on a grassroots basis, volunteering their time to maintain certification standards on behalf of the organic movement. Notable economic growth has since caused the boards to finally take notice of organic agriculture, but not to the benefit of the organic movement. Rather, the response of the marketing boards was that if the organic market grows enough to challenge the market share of the conventional agricultural economy, organic producers will be taxed the same as conventional producers, though none of the funds collected will be returned to help develop the organic sector.

The primary example to date of this looming policy response is the recent decree of the BC Egg Marketing Board that organically and conventionally produced eggs are not significantly different products, and therefore organic egg producers who are large enough will henceforth be subject to acquiring quota licenses and paying the same levies as conventional egg producers. The Egg Marketing Board now extracts the same levies from organic egg producers as conventional ones, but the money collected is reallocated exclusively to support conventional cage layer egg production. While some organic egg producers had previously protested this redistribution of income from organic to conventional producers by refusing to pay, they are now legally obliged to do so.

While discussing this issue, Anne and Jane both implied that a negative attitude toward organic farmers on the part of the marketing boards underlies this ruling. They argued that the decision is a perfect example of how negative attitudes toward organic farmers are an integral aspect of the ideological suppression of alternatives to conventional agriculture:

We really want to support organic egg producers in the face of marketing boards who'd really like to throw them out of business. They built their own market without the help of marketing boards, and it is completely unfair that they have to be subject to levies and other regulations. We went to them ten years ago and they laughed us out of there. They weren't taking organic seriously back then. [Anne]

At one time we knocked on their door [of the provincial marketing boards] and said "this is what we're doing" and they went "go away". And now that the market is growing and they're starting to sit up and pay attention and see that we aren't just a bunch of old hippies, you know, that have a thing to say, now that we're actually in the market and doing a fair dollar's worth of business a year, now they're paying attention. [Jane]

Whether laughed at and told to "go away", or charged levies that go to support agricultural practices they oppose, the experiences of organic farmers testify that the interests of the marketing boards rest solely in sustaining conventional and not organic agriculture. Once ignored entirely, organic agriculture is done an equal disservice in this case by being treated as indistinct from conventional agriculture. As the organic sector has grown, the marketing boards have reacted by trying to minimize its impact on the conventional food economy. Organic growers I interviewed worry that this trend will continue in the future as long as the powers that be continue privileging conventional agriculture.

(ii) Ecological rationale

The following set of quotes highlights how interviewees used terms like 'natural', 'regenerative', 'sustainable' and so forth to position organic farming practices in opposition to conventional ones. By arguing that organic farming is based on a superior 'ecological rationality', they countered negative perceptions of organic farming as 'inefficient' and 'backward'. Their common desire to farm in an environmentally sound manner without compromising their economic security was a very important factor that motivated pioneer organic farmers to build the market for organic foods in BC.

Interviewees confirmed the common perception that the main differences between organic and conventional agriculture are due largely to their divergent approaches to soil management. There was a consensus among them that the correct way to farm is to follow the 'rule of return' by continually replenishing the soil with organic matter and employing practices that facilitate a diverse mix of beneficial ecological interactions. Comments such as the following ones by Jane and Joe were typical:

If you take care of the soil it will benefit you in the long run. Lots of times the way they do monocropping, it's the same crop over and over again and it's depleting the soil, and you put chemicals in there to make it better. Well, it just makes a lot more sense to build the soil first and have it produce a range of crops so you can avoid some of the diseases, pests, and whatnot. [Jane]

There was a farm behind our place and it was rented by a dairy farmer and he used to pour fertilizer on it. It took four years before that grass looked green again after he left. Everywhere else the grass would be green and the field would be yellow. The soil was anemic. But I notice that every year our farm produces more from the very same soil just from the stuff we recycle into the ground. [...] You just realize that what you're doing is building up the soil and not sterilizing it. You're adding fibre and finding natural ways to rejuvenate the soil. We have neighbours with a big chunk of land where they grow potatoes, and they pay a guy to come in with a machine. I don't know how much they have to pay him an acre but it injects some sort of chemical into the soil and it kills everything, every single living organism in that soil so they have sterile soil and can start fresh. And so they have to end up

using lots of fertilizers because there's nothing to nourish the plants. They spread turkey manure and then add chemical fertilizers to it. [Joe]

In the first quote, Jane argues that while monocropping may yield admirable results in the short-term, over time it will deplete natural on-farm resources, ultimately leading to diminished productivity in the long-term. Consistent productivity is therefore best ensured by undertaking the labour-intensive work of soil building, a concept interviewees implied is ignored by many conventional growers. Similarly, in the second quote Joe defines the organic method as "building up the soil" by recycling organic matter in order to "rejuvenate" a "natural" basis of plant nourishment. In contrast, soil management the conventional way is "sterilizing", and makes the soil "anemic" because it "kills everything".

To give one more example, Anne made similar comments:

I farm organically because I believe in methods that are nature-friendly. Methods that I choose to use are incompatible with chemical shortcuts. It's as much a spiritual as a scientific and ecological approach. Farming is largely a matter of inputs, so as an organic farmer I want to nurture the soil to facilitate growth of plants.

The message of Anne's words here is unmistakable: since the "chemical shortcuts" of conventional methods are "incompatible" with the "nature-friendly" methods of organic farming, the struggle between organic and conventional farming is essentially one between right and wrong.

According to the style of soil management one chooses, a specific set of consequences will follow, and, as I will continue to show using quotes throughout, without exception interviewees explained in very similar terms why what follows from organic methods is better than what follows from conventional ones. Whereas organic practices "take care of", "nurture" and "build" the soil in a manner that will "benefit you

in the long run", conventional ones lead to a vicious circle where farmers become dependent on "lots of fertilizers" to stay chronic soil depletion. Organic methods both avoid the risks of excessive reliance on chemicals, and reap productivity enhancing benefits. Ecological considerations like the ones discussed here were important in giving impetus to the organic movement.

(iii) Political economic rationale

Farmers also frequently raised the issue of the economic hardship that faces most farmers, arguing that it is a problem that is intimately tied to productivism engendered by conventional agriculture. As the costs of fossil fuel inputs and land have increased, and overproduction has saturated global food markets, farmers have become trapped in the middle of a cost-price squeeze where they are less and less able to pay for inputs, or sell their products for a profit (Norberg-Hodge, et al 1993). Interviewees gave many examples of how this problem has left modern day farmers desperate for alternatives:

Small farmers are starting to turn to agritourism. They're having pumpkin patches and hay rides and charging three to five dollars a kid. This is what farmers are doing to make it these days. This is helping farmers to get by, but the downside is that the farmer doesn't get to farm anymore. [Patty]

I had education to be a carpenter. The idea there is if you have to have an answering machine, a truck, and \$30,000 of equipment, then you deserve \$35 an hour for the work you do. Then you have a farmer who has a million dollars invested in buildings and thousands in equipment who is to sell what he owns so he can farm the next year. He has to refinance so he can have enough money to live for the following year, to buy feed, buy fuel, and send his kids to school. [Jim]

The marketing system, the marketing boards and the subsidies, allow bad farmers to survive. I think there are a lot of good conventional farmers out there, and if they're good they're trying to get away from the chemicals because they have an awareness of the systems (...) in the world around them, and they see that this isn't working, that they're caught up paying mortgages and they're caught up in marketing controls and things like that, so what else can they do? [Jill]

When small groups of farmers started founding certifying bodies in BC, the intention was to help farmers get away not only from conventional agricultural practices, but also from the burdensome economic patterns in which that form of agriculture is embroiled. Being certified granted access to a market where higher prices were charged for organic products, and thereby made the financial risks of organic farming less discouraging for new growers. This new monetary incentive successfully attracted many farmers to convert to organic practices. In this way, creating certification was a way of redressing the economic plight of farmers trying to farm organically.

Anne insisted that her participation in the creation of a certifying body was on behalf of the 'movement' rather than just an act of narrow self-interest. To her, expansion into a wider market via certification was a way not only to help organic farmers capitalize, but also to advance her vision of a just agricultural system:

Getting certified didn't make a difference for us, because we already had established our relationships. Creating a certifying body was a commitment from us to the movement so we could get other farmers to get into the act. In order to have more organic production, we needed more organic farmers. So we tried to create the incentive and show them they could do marketing in other niches.

Pioneer farmers criticized the centralizing tendencies of conventional agriculture that have increased both the physical and the cultural distance between producers and consumers. In response, they argued in favour of regionalizing agricultural economies by fostering mutual ties between producers and consumers in local communities to build durable, trust-based economic relationships. Many of them related views about 'community' that they saw as integral to the true enactment of the alternative vision represented by organic agriculture:

The issue is not so much about organic as it is about community building. The industrialization of our world has caused the loss of communities. If our farmers

went away, yes we could get food from somewhere else, but then we'd be dependent. People need to keep a base of agricultural production in their home area. You can take away the stock market and people will survive but if you take away food the consequences will be felt sooner or later. [Patty]

It's pretty important to have local farmers because transporting food long distances spews so much pollution. And besides it's just good to build community. I think it's really important to have a good sense of community, it's crucial. Organic has been grassroots with a good to the neighbour type idea, like family farms used to be but aren't so much anymore. [Jane]

When you have customers you have friends. This is the way we in the original organic movement saw it. And when you sell them food you have them eat at your table. That's the point of view a lot of us had. See, food is worth more than money. It's too fabulous, it's too wonderful. It's just beyond that. I believe and I think a whole lot of my sort believe that in the past, that's how food was valued. You grow food for the love of food. You don't grow it for the love of profit. [Glen]

A consequence of the centralization of production has been an according centralization of the economy of distribution, and interviewees had much to say about the depersonalizing effects of this phenomenon. When local producers are lacking, consumers must rely on long-distance networks to supply them with food. This fosters an agricultural economy characterized by large-scale operations at every site along the commodity chain from farm to table. Local regions become dependent on foods imported from distant lands, and producers and consumers as a rule become anonymous to one another. But if more small to mid-sized farms were dispersed across the land, community-based ties where a diversity of producers could hold a reliable niche in their home area could emerge. The 'community' vision espoused by organic pioneers was another reason why they worked so hard to create certification.

Warning of the importance of food security in maintaining Canada's sovereignty, some farmers invested particularly ideological symbolism in the notion of 'organic' agriculture:

Farmers today are spending their equity to stay in business and subsidize food costs for the rest of the people. Politicians claim we have low costs for food and are such a bountiful country, however it's being done on the backs of farmers. [...] But I don't think the population in general understands the importance of it, they're too busy trying to survive themselves. I think the awareness could come quickly or it could come in a long time from now. It could happen that the border between the US and Canada will close and a week later there won't be any food on the shelves in Canada. Then the awareness will be there, it will be very obvious. For the sustainability of Canada, we have to become more self-reliant... [Jim]

Nobody feeds the world and it's presumptuous for all these guys to say that we must have an industrial model to feed the world. Screw you, you megalomaniac, you're not going to feed the world. Who the hell do you think you are? Let the world feed itself. Feed yourself. What this guy wants is that he feeds the world and the world feeds him, and that's a hell of an imbalance. And what happens? He becomes part of a polity like we have now, the American empire, and we're living in the American empire. [Glen]

As these quotes illustrate, interviewees sometimes invested very strong political meanings in their reflections on the role of organic agriculture. Such comments convey a deep sense of urgency that agricultural reform must happen as soon as possible to avoid imminent chaos. Clearly, these speakers view agricultural issues as laying at the very heart of the social fabric, and consequently place great importance on them.

The three themes I have discussed in this section have all been important discursive sources of common identification uniting BC's organic movement. For many interviewees, farming organically is an experience that connects them to a wide set of societal implications that clearly transcend immediate production-level issues. They collectively articulated values of agricultural decentralization, environmentalism, community building, and economic independence for farmers, which, taken together, constitute a politically meaningful, radical agrarianism.

Certification was the mechanism that pioneer organic farmers hoped would allow them to practice their values as well as spread them to others. The legitimating effects of

certification would allow organic farmers to access the mainstream market where improved financial returns could be attained. This would bring unprecedented financial security to organic farmers, thereby enabling them to employ the ecological farming practices in which they believed. Economic development facilitated by certification would give new credibility to organic producers, and end denigrations directed towards them. For this set of reasons, certification was seen as a tool that could further the organic movement as nothing had before.

I will now move on to discuss what certification is and how the first certifying bodies were formed in BC. This will provide a segue into a later discussion in the next chapter of the internal politics that have come to colour the organic movement. As certification standards have changed with time, they have become a source of struggle and division among farmers within the movement. I will show that, in contrast with the common assumption that all organic farmers employ similar practices and often share common views, the difficulty of maintaining consensus on organic standards demonstrates that this is simply not the case.

1.2 Understanding Organic Certification

Consumers expect organic food to embody a diversity of 'green' quality values (Lockie et al, 2002; Goodman et al, 2002). The satisfaction of these expectations relies entirely on the legitimating power of certification. Consumers perceive certified organic food to be 'more organic' than other food because certification requires farmers' practices to follow a prescribed code of organic production overseen by accredited inspectors. But

how is that code determined, and what 'green' values does it ensure or not ensure? This section will address these questions.

The idea behind 'certified organic' labelling is that it guarantees that a given product has met a standardized code of organic production. This lends credibility to products marketed as 'organic' that might otherwise be viewed with skepticism, since the mere word 'organic' appearing on a grocery store product does not in itself offer consumers an explanation of what that word really means. Since customers cannot observe the practices of growers directly, certification functions as a 'surrogate for trust' that purports to grant outsiders an 'objective' view of farmers' practices (DeLind, 2000). The argument goes that in the absence of such rules there is little basis for consumers to judge whether or not a product claimed to be 'organic' is actually the genuine article. Certification makes growers accountable for their claims, for if products marketed as 'certified organic' have not been verified as such, legal trouble can follow. This protects both producers and consumers from those who might fraudulently market their products as 'organic' when they are not.

Certification is intended to establish a concrete set of criteria according to which a given practice may be designated as 'organic'. There are three key steps involved in the creation of a certification standard. The first step is to create a certifying body charged with the task of writing the standard. Next, specific guidelines for organic production are codified in a written document that becomes the official certification standard for that body. This is the standard to which members of the certifying body must adhere in order to become certified. But because differences often exist within a group, it is difficult to reach consensus on a singular, official definition of 'organic'. Since there is no universal

definition of organic production, each individual certifying body creates its own distinct rules. One major challenge of devising a certification standard is that while common understandings of organic principles may inform the choices made by standard-setters, the actual application of those principles is open-ended. At each step in the process, the trade-off between principles and practical realities must carefully be weighed:

It's a real challenge to keep everyone's individual ideas focused on one main goal. When I became president, the group's views were quite split into two sides. There's no pleasing everyone. When you represent the group you have to represent the whole group not just your own idea. I don't want to take the group where I want to go because I represent the group. If you don't work with the system you lose your power, you lose input into the change and the process. ["Gary"]

The final certification document contains various sections detailing the certifying body's expectations of certification procedures, land and resource management, crop management, livestock standards, and so on.

Once a concrete definition of 'organic' is settled upon, the third step is to elect or hire a certification committee to administer a system of record-keeping for documenting and inspecting farmers' practices. This is to ensure members comply with the standard. In most cases, a certification committee elected from among the members of the body is entrusted with the task of inspection, though in more recent times, it has become more common to hire an independent third-party certification committee that audits not only the members but also the administration of the certifying body itself. In BC, certifying bodies accredited by COABC must also hire a third-party verification officer who checks growers' records and practices at least once a year. Record-keeping required from growers provides a paper trail which ensures that organic farms and foods are subject to inspection so that the manner in which any certified organic item was produced may later be retraced. Certifying bodies must decide which particular practices will be inspected,

and the degree of detail farmers must record. Typically, farmers are required to provide a production plan that outlines their entire farm management strategy, including details about the timing and location of planting, crop rotations, soil-building methods, crop protection strategies, harvesting and post-harvesting practices, treatment of livestock, manure management, and numerous other activities. They must also provide records of their sales.

1.3 The Original Certifying Bodies

The story of the emergence of organic agriculture from relatively obscure origins in various rural pockets of BC begins in the 1970s. At that time, organic agriculture was so small in BC that it was uncommon to find products labelled 'organic' in any grocery store. Prior to the upsurge of consumer demand for organics in the 1990s, there were less than one hundred organic farms in BC. Early organic farmers were scattered in regions throughout the province, including the Similkameen Valley, the Fraser Valley, the Okanagan, and on Vancouver Island. During the 1970s, most early organic farmers relied on selling locally to grocers and customers with whom they were acquainted personally. In urban centres, minimal consumer demand meant that only specialized health food stores supplied organic foods while mainstream supermarkets did not. Some farmers were exporting to the US at that time as well. Early exporting was done through BC's first organic wholesaler, Wild West. Established in Richmond in 1976, Wild West specialized in distributing organic food throughout Canada and the US. Since stores in the US at this time were already asking that organic products be certified, Wild West also offered an organic certification service for those exporting to the American market.

The first formal certifying bodies started in BC during the 1980s. The first was the Similkameen Okanagan Organic Producers Association, founded in 1986. Originally there were around dozen members in this group, and all of them worked together to develop the body's initial organic standard. SOOPA came together with the intent to create a standard that would help its members protect their market share as American products marked 'certified organic' became more prominent in both BC and US markets. To formulate their standard, SOOPA borrowed from the regulations that had already been developed by American certifying bodies, particularly California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF] and Oregon Tilth.⁸ They soon came up with a standard adapted to their particular bioregion.

Gary was one of the founding members and recalled the process with these words:

SOOPA was formed in 1986 with the goal to certify for our bioregion. There were around twelve to fifteen of us in the beginning. We sat down and had meetings to come up with a standard. We took a lot of inspiration from the American certifying bodies because they were already operating and so we looked to them for examples. We then turned to our own bioregion and made note of soils, pests, and diseases to come up with requirements that were appropriate for us.

Consisting of like-minded farmers, SOOPA's original standard was designed to be rather more stringent than other standards they had studied. As I will discuss later on, even today, certain requirements of this standard remain more rigid than the standards used by most other BC certifying bodies. In this respect, SOOPA has always maintained an agenda to advance the principles of organic agriculture as beneficial in themselves. Glen, another founder of SOOPA, reflected on this aspect of the founding of the certifying body with the following words:

⁸ CCOF and Oregon Tilth were founded in Santa Cruz, California (1973) and Salem, Oregon (1974) respectively.

Originally we were a unified body of like-minded people at the grassroots. It was indeed a grassroots entity which had in their wisdom, and outside of expert control, produced a very reasonable form of agriculture, a model for an agriculture that was going to be sustainable and diverse. This is what we were after.

The advancement, then, of both economic and philosophical goals motivated the founding of SOOPA.

Around the same time as SOOPA was founded, another group of growers located in the Fraser Valley began forming a different organic farmers' association. This was the British Columbia Association for Regenerative Agriculture. Also founded in 1986, BCARA consisted of a mere half dozen members who had originally come together not to design a certification standard, but simply to trade farming tips and to help others learn to use organic methods. Their agenda would soon change, however, as more and more US products labelled 'certified organic' began appearing in the BC market. The necessity to develop standards became clear as it became increasingly difficult to sell organic products without certification. It appeared that it would soon no longer suffice to market products as 'organic' without proof. BCARA's members quickly realized that the unanticipated issue of authenticity would have to be addressed in order to maintain access to the growing organic niche market:

BCARA started in 1986. It was from that group that we started promoting organic on a larger scale. We never had anything about certification in our constitution at that time. It was going on, there were some people in the Okanagan, and Wild West was certifying organic farms. So we announced we were organic and began promoting ourselves without certification, so people came down on us saying "where's your certification?" We then went to develop a certified organic standard and actually pushed the standard tonnes further than had been done in BC at that point. [Paul]

When I got on board in the late 1980s, there was a small group of farmers who formed BCARA. At that time they weren't certifying yet, they were just interested in regenerative ways of agriculture. We'd meet once a month and just kind of get together and deal with some issues, but it was only later on when the market started asking for certification that we started certifying in the early 1990s. The stores

started wanting certification because that's what the Americans were doing. All the imports said 'certified' so then they started looking into it. At that time I think just calling it organic was good enough because there was so little of it around that it was taken at face value. But the States was where stores were getting most of their product because there wasn't very much around here. So they pretty much lead the way. [Jane]

There seemed little choice but to accept the new expectation that all products sold as 'organic' be verified as such. Confronted with this pressure, BCARA set to work developing an organic standard that would allow it to function as a certifying body. Like SOOPA had done before them, BCARA also modelled its standard by borrowing from previously existing ones while tailoring it to reflect conditions in their local region.

We started meeting in 1986, and by 1990 had our first farm certified. We used a lot of standards from other areas and put together what seemed to make sense for our bioregion. [Anne]

The farmers of BCARA soon came to appreciate the advantages of having their own certification standard. Because of the credibility it produced, certification opened up new opportunities to promote organic agriculture on a wider scale. And since certification was created from the bottom-up by farmers themselves rather than by the government, early certifying bodies also retained total control over the definition of 'organic'. This was a crucial point for pioneer farmers since in commercializing organic agriculture it was very important to them that its integrity as an alternative agriculture be maintained.

Free to determine standards as they wished, the members of SOOPA and BCARA attempted to devise regulations that were rigorous yet accessible to less experienced growers. In this way they hoped that commercialization via certification would act as a vehicle for advancing an organic agriculture that would remain true to its agrarian roots:

BCARA had a lot to do with starting the organic movement and making it popular. Other certifying bodies as well began happening at about the same time. The values were of family farms, small farms, and sustainability, for the family unit as well as

production of the land, and at the same time for habitat for other species. Not just clearing everything so you could grow a monocrop, but cultivating a diversity of crops and allowing for a diversity of habitat for other species. [Jim]

In this quote, Jim credits the founding of certifying bodies as "starting the organic movement". As he states, in formulating organic standards, early members of this movement wanted to promote not just a certain style of farming, but also a wider social vision based on a conservationist agrarian ethic. Creating certification standards was an attempt to institutionalize this ethic and make it into something tangible that could be acted upon.

Anne gave a similar account of the original movement-oriented optimism surrounding BCARA's decision to begin certifying:

I was one of the original four of BCARA. A lot of the meetings were held at agricultural offices of the provincial government in Cloverdale and it was at a lot of those sessions where different rules and regulations were decided on. Voluntary meetings were held on different farms and they went all night. Our belief was that you have to put a face to the food. People have to know where their food comes from. It need not travel 1200 miles from the farm to the plate.

Again, 'organic' symbolized not just a different set of farming practices but also a different potential for economic organization. The members of SOOPA and BCARA tried to take advantage of the growing organic market as an opportunity to further the politics they saw as complimentary to the values of ecological diversity and respect for the environment in which the techniques of organic farming were grounded.

1.4 A Diversity of Organic Standards

Slowly but surely, more certifying bodies began to spring up across BC. In 1989, the North Okanagan Organic Growers Association [NOOA] was formed. This group was soon followed by the Island Organic Producers Association [IOPA], established on

Vancouver Island in 1990. As more certifying bodies emerged, the number of distinct versions of 'certified' organic production also rose. This would prove to be both a positive and negative development for the organic movement. While it signalled a fantastic growth in the number of organic farmers in the province, the proliferation of certifying standards soon became problematic. With so many different bodies regulating their own uniquely-conceived standards, the notion of 'organic' began to appear ambiguous. Did all certifying bodies have equally rigorous standards, or were some just in it for the money? As I will discuss in the next chapter, efforts to harmonize certification standards across the regions of BC would eventually become a source of deep divisions within the organic movement.

Before entering into a discussion of that issue, however, it will be instructive to first look more closely at the reasons why organic standards differ from one another. I will show that any certification scheme can regulate farmers' practices only to a limited extent. The three main reasons why are: the particularity of local physical factors; the varying availability of organic input substitutes; and the ambiguity around what should count as an 'organic' input or process. Due to these factors, variation in the regulations and practices followed by different certifying bodies is in fact a defining feature of organic certification.

(i) Physical geographical variation

Certification standards must always be adapted to reflect the physical traits of the particular bioregion to which they apply. British Columbia encompasses a very large area, and organic standards cannot be written in a one-size fits all manner to cover all

areas of the province with a single stroke. This is because its numerous bioregions include many different subclimates, landforms, soil types, insect populations, and so on. Since the diverse regions of the province are suited to growing different crops, each region requires its own unique standards and management strategies. The environmental constraints facing organic farmers in one region differ greatly from those facing farmers in another, and organic techniques that apply in one area may not be appropriate in another. The soil management and pest control practices that work well for a mixed vegetable grower in the Fraser Valley may be completely irrelevant to an orchardist in the Okanagan. Far from being definitive, then, organic standards must instead be designed to be malleable:

Standards are always changing and are different for each bioregion since they are always accounting for different amounts of rainfall, amounts of sunlight, heat, types of soil, elevations, and other factors which determine farming conditions. These considerations affect whether certain amendments are allowed in a particular region or not. ["Bev"]

Even on the same plot of land, each year presents different conditions, and crops that grew well one year will not necessarily do as well the next year. Thus standards must make provisions for times when challenging circumstances, such as lack of availability of a needed organic input or a pest infestation, make farmers particularly vulnerable to disaster. If a farmer faces crop failure due to infestation, they may be given an exemption to temporarily use a spray that would not normally be allowed under standards. Unpredictable and irregular fluctuations in physical conditions complicate the elusive goal to writing standards that are consistent yet practical, and it is up to each certifying body to decide how much flexibility should be included in its standard to enable farmers to deal with unexpected natural impediments.

(ii) Uncertainty of input availability

Issues of availability can confound even the most basic steps a group might take towards becoming a certifying body. High costs or lack of supply of organic inputs can easily thwart hopes of realizing organic ideals:

There aren't a lot of organic seeds out there, especially in the varieties we want. Do we compromise our variety or do we compromise our seed source? I grow Blue Lake pole beans, and they are not available organically in the quantities I need at a price that is affordable. Conventional they're about a dollar a kilo, but if I want them organic, I'm probably looking at four dollars a kilo. And if I go to buy them, they'll say I can only have five pounds because other growers want some too. Well five pounds is no good to me because I want twenty-five pounds. [Bev]

Organic inputs may be limited in supply or prohibitively more expensive than conventional equivalents. In such cases, a dilemma arises for standard-setters: either allow the use of a conventional input instead, or exclude a certain set of farmers from becoming certified organic. What are the environmental risks of the conventional chemical? How justifiable is the cost of its organic alternative? Again, these are tough questions that must be settled on a case-by-case basis by certifying body committees who can judge what limitations should be imposed on farmers in their respective local areas.

Another availability issue is that long distance sourcing is contrary to many farmers' conceptions of 'organic'. Since these farmers view the provision of an environmentally sound and less resource dependent alternative to conventional agriculture as the whole point of farming organically, they argue that the pollution and consumption of non-renewable resources entailed by long distance transportation of input substitutes can throw the entire notion of 'organic' into question:

In some ways I would put less rigour in the standards. If you had to put organic inputs from Chile on your farm, there might be a conventional option that is more nearby. [Paul]

You lose a lot of those sustainability points by using fertilizers brought in from another country or another continent. Being organic not only means not using chemicals, it also means adapting to the conditions in your bioregion and learning to be resourceful with the natural world around you. [Jill]

For those who view values of decentralization and local production for local consumption as a logical component of organic farming philosophy, the significance of organic farming as an alternative agriculture is compromised when it relies on imported inputs, as well as when its products are marketed primarily on the global market.

(iii) 'Organic' inputs are contentious

Issues of availability aside, standard-setters must face the deeper question: what qualifies as a valid 'organic' input in the first place? Classifying inputs in a manner that faithfully represents organic principles is one of the main difficulties of formalizing an organic standard. One might assume that, aside from the adaptations required to reflect local bioregional conditions, the logic behind organic standards is value-free. This is not the case. Any attempt to devise a standard code of organic production, even among a small group of people, presents manifold difficulties. 'Organic' evokes a diversity of meanings, but certification necessitates that only a certain number of those meanings be selected as essential. In order to function properly, standards must neither be too strong nor too weak. If they are too strong, enrollment in certification schemes will be discouraged, and opportunities for the organic sector to grow will be lost. But if they are too weak, the very notion of 'organic' risks being undermined. Since the factors affecting farming conditions are in constant flux, standards must be left subject to amendment. Once developed, the organic standard developed by a given certifying body will be revised periodically. Usually once a year, every certifying body will review the

performance of its standardization program and make adjustments to it accordingly. So rather than somehow representing organic production objectively, standards instead reflect a provisional response to the ever-contentious question of how to define 'organic' so that it may be operationalized in a consistent way across dissimilar local contexts.

Even when a group holds organic principles in common, how to define organic production using particular criteria is another matter. The problem returns to the tension between goals of ecological soundness and soil preservation on one hand, and goals of productivity and meeting market demand on the other. Due to the numerous variables that affect farming conditions, there is never a final answer to this overarching question. Debates over how far organic principles should be enshrined in standards are ongoing in the organic community.

A difficulty when you set standards is that there are limitations to how well organic farming can be represented just by the rules. Definitely there is a conventional attitude among some farmers, and some think this is a really bad thing. More and more growers look at this and decide to go organic for economic reasons. There are certainly some who don't like this development. [Peter]

A lot of time farmers will disagree with regulations because they will feel they can't produce their product without certain inputs. There's a lot of controversy because every farmer is an individual. So no standard is perfect, not everyone can be pleased. You always have to put a bit of water in your wine. [Gary]

Certification standards have to operate by do's and don'ts, which doesn't take you the whole way. You could farm unorganically and satisfy the BC standard just by using the inputs in the standard. [Paul]

(iv) The fracturing of a certifying body

Standards have always been a source of conflict within the organic movement. While the rise of SOOPA and BCARA initially strengthened the organic community's sense of collective identity and purpose, as more certifying bodies emerged, the meanings

attached to 'organic' were of course diversified and became progressively more contentious. Though the increasing numbers of certifying bodies and organic farmers testified to the advance of the organic movement, greater variety in certification standards and 'organic' farming practices was also seen by some within the movement as potentially confusing to consumers, and therefore threatening to the integrity of organic producers. Precisely because of the fantastic growth of the organic market, the relatively sudden emergence of different certifying bodies following different standards begged questions of who was defining the terms of certification and what their interests were.

There are many cases where lack of consensus has become a source of division within certifying bodies. The example of the rift that took place among the members of SOOPA will help to illustrate this point in better detail. In the Similkameen Valley, the cherry fruit fly is a particularly invasive pest that farmers are not easily rid of without recourse to pesticides. Because the organic techniques available for dealing with this pest are so labour-intensive but also often ineffective, many organic farmers in this region regularly suffer damage to their cherry crop:

Cherry fruit fly is almost impossible to stop. There are some cherry growers here and the only way you can do it without spraying is only if you grow early varieties and do a very strict clean up. You have to take all the fruit off the trees and not leave anything hanging, it is very tedious. Also you do floor management, some people saying having chickens around the trees helps because they eat they pupae that overwinter in the ground, but I don't know if there's any real evidence of that. [Peter]

In the absence of straightforward organic solutions to the fruit fly problem, the members of SOOPA became divided between those who preferred labour intensive means of control versus those who saw regulated use of certain conventional sprays as the appropriate solution.

This issue, however, was not the first time the group had split into two factions over standards. Other issues, particularly that of split production, had already polarized them in the past. Split production refers to the practice of managing some crops organically and some crops conventionally on the same plot of land. While those that wanted to completely prohibit conventional sprays also wanted to continue prohibiting split production, the others wanted to allow provisional use of conventional sprays for cherry fruit fly, as well as include regulations permitting split production. Glen was one of the members of SOOPA who wanted to avoid adopting the minimum standard. He harshly criticized the standard, portraying it as one that has effectively diluted the quality of organic farming in BC:

Split production has corrupted the organic movement completely. Split production introduces, if not downright fraud, at least a possibility for it. It produces a possibility for corruption in terms of production because you have this part organic and this part ain't.

Disagreements such as these eventually culminated in a splitting up of SOOPA, with those wanting to follow the less severe 'minimum standard' instituted by COABC in 1993⁹ departing to form a new certifying body known as the Organic Producers Association of Cawston and Keremeos [OPACK]:

OPACK split off from SOOPA because they wanted more flexibility in the standards. One of the big differences that still exists between them is how they interpret the standard in terms of parallel production. There were also differences in the classification of materials. [Patty]

A lot of people fear that split production is causing the erosion of organic. With split production there can be confusion, there's a lot of room for error. You have to use the same machinery for one plot and then wash it before use on another. We started quite a few years ago and said no we don't want split production. We also wanted a five-year transitional plan so that within that time you could convert everything into the plan, and disagreement on this kind of issue is why we had the split with OPACK. [Peter]

⁹ The creation of COABC and the provincial minimum standard will be discussed in the next chapter.

While the respective members of SOOPA and OPACK all saw themselves as 'organic' farmers, they had very different attitudes about what acceptable rules of organic production were.

An interesting new example showing the differences that continue to divide these two groups has emerged in recent years. Recently it has been found that Spinosad, a newly-developed biological pesticide, is extremely effective at eradicating cherry fruit fly. An article in BC Organic Grower, a magazine published for members of COABC, noted in the Fall, 2004 edition that Spinosad "is working so well for organic cherry growers in the Washington area that organic wholesalers and retailers are reporting literally tons and tons of that fruit have been exported into Canada this season with no problems with claims because of cherry fruit fly" (Edwards, 2004:21). Meanwhile in Canada, where Spinosad was not registered with the Pest Management Regulatory Agency [PMRA] and therefore unavailable for sale, during 2004 the fruit fly thrived unhindered in cherry regions, decimating the season's crop. While Washington producers enjoyed a bumper crop, in BC there was "almost no product available". As the organic fertilizer and pesticide industries have grown, more purportedly 'organic' off-farm input substitutes such as Spinosad have become available, but lack of scientific knowledge of their ecological effects prevents them from being taken at face value by many farmers. But due to different perceptions of what constitutes a properly 'organic' input, some BC organic growers were eager to have Spinosad registered in Canada. Whereas OPACK quickly accepted the validity of Spinosad, SOOPA did not:

OPACK was approaching us to put money into a bacteria for cherry control. The US chemical company Dow had the product, but it was not certified in Canada. When OPACK tried to get it from them, they said they would not pay for

certification because the market was too small in Canada. OPACK asked us to help foot the bill for Dow to have it approved in Canada, so we said "hey where's the evidence". We didn't know how broad spectrum it was, if it would kill more than it was supposed to. The people from OPACK went on to pay the approval for Dow on their own but they needed it most because they have the split production anyway. [Gary]

During 2005, a number of cherry growers successfully applied for an exemption and were granted permits from COABC for conditional use of Spinosad. Though this substance remains controversial, it is possible that there will be enough consensus within the organic community for this agent to gain either 'allowed' or 'regulated' status under the BC organic standard in the future.

Standards are contentious because they mediate between the dual imperatives of productivity and conservation. The Spinosad and split production controversies illustrate the kind of differences that can come between organic growers regarding the adaptation of organic ideals into regulated practices. Standards are the primary source of dispute within the organic movement because they determine the farming practices with which farmers must comply in order to be credible in the market. They have immediate consequences for the kind and amount of labour expected of growers. For more radically-minded growers, the issue of what version of 'organic' is protected under standards is vital since this determines what form of agriculture will ultimately be supported by consumers who purchase organic products.

Chapter 5 - COABC and the Growth of the Organic Industry

1.1 Creating a 'Minimum Standard'

The previous chapter ended with a discussion of the impediments to the consistent standardization of organic production. This chapter will continue into further detail on this theme. It will emphasize in particular how the meanings ascribed to 'organic' via standards have changed over time, and how these reflect ideological splits within the ranks of the organic movement. Because it has had major implications for the manner in which the organic sector has developed in BC, I will do this with particular reference to the creation of COABC.

During the 1990s, the regional certifying body quickly became the chief institution representing the organic movement in BC as more and more of them were founded in regions across the province. As they proliferated, a diversity of organic standards emerged. This diversity in standards led to criticism from some organic farmers that since each certifying body used its own 'certified organic' label, the regulation of BC organic products was becoming too confusing to appear reliable to consumers, and therefore represented a threat to effective marketing:

The COABC was created to improve consumer confidence because 'organic' is a contentious term, and people sometimes question if the labelling is consistent with what's permitted. There was a committee selected from certifying body delegates so that the views of different certifying bodies would be represented in the minimum standard. [Rod]

Meanwhile, limited access to foreign markets was also becoming an issue for a number of growers. Such concerns eventually led to calls for the formation of a larger body that could improve market access by instituting a single standard for all producers throughout BC. COABC became that body.

Established through an unusual agreement between the nascent organic industry and the provincial government, COABC instituted a new 'minimum standard' regulating organic production in BC that was intended both to enhance the marketability of organic products and to increase the number of organic farmers. The credibility of the minimum standard would be ensured by creating a third-party certification scheme that would allow accredited farmers to sell their products using 'British Columbia Certified Organic' labels. But because certifying bodies throughout the province were already overseeing their own bioregionally-adapted standards, the minimum standard was also designed with an eye to preserving those bodies' control over aspects of regulation that were particularly contingent on local conditions. Certain powers of self-regulation needed to be retained by the regional certifying bodies.

This chapter will show that while the minimum standard was supposed to lessen the ambiguity of the term 'organic', in many respects it actually culminated in the opposite. By enticing many new farmers into the organic sector, the number of voices involved in amending standards in each certifying body became greater, and opinions about what was appropriate to include in standards, as well as how to enforce them, became even more diverse. In some cases, such differences of opinion resulted in the fracturing of certifying bodies following the introduction of COABC. Organic movement pioneers argued that the reason there continues to be disagreement among certifying bodies is that new growers who enter organic farming often do not share their sentiments, and consequently tend to retain a 'conventional mentality' in spite of their 'certified' practices. So while the inception of COABC represented an attempt to bring greater

unity to the organic movement, ongoing struggles over how standards should be written have not subsided.

A landmark instance of cooperation between the organic industry and the government of BC came in 1993 with the creation of COABC under the revised Food Choice Act. Under the newly-dubbed Agri-Food Choice and Quality Act, the new Organic Agricultural Products Certification Regulation was created. Its purpose was to help the marketing of organic food by establishing standards for its production. Under this agreement, COABC became a new umbrella organization vested with exclusive power to accredit certifying bodies with the endorsement of the provincial government.

A small group of people were charged with the responsibility of developing COABC's original minimum standard. It included one representative from each of the half dozen certifying bodies then in existence, and a handful of government officials, including one technical assistant with scientific expertise (who later went on to become an organic farmer). The group drew from the standards of BC certifying bodies and the unofficial 'international' standard of IFOAM. After a number of drafts were passed back and forth between the drafting committee and the certifying bodies, the first incarnation of the official BC minimum standard was settled.

Under this standard, inputs and practices are classified as either 'required', 'allowed', 'regulated', or 'prohibited'. The classification of a given input or process as 'allowed' or 'prohibited' under this standard is firm but not permanent, for provisions allowing the amendment of regulations are included. The 'required' and 'regulated' categories, however, are more open to interpretation at the discretion of each certifying body. The 'required' category often includes reference to certain 'principles' of organic

production that must be carried out, though the specifics of how this must happen are left largely up to each individual certifying body. The 'regulated' category allows growers to apply to their certifying body under extenuating circumstances to use an input or practice that would not ordinarily be permitted. Permission may be granted by a local certification committee on conditions that a plan be submitted to gradually phase out use of the regulated practice or input, and that documentation be provided showing no allowed alternatives are available.

COABC is administrated by a Board of Directors who are elected each year by member certifying bodies. The job of the Board is to address the concerns of members while also carrying out the mandates of the Organic Agricultural Products Regulation on behalf of the provincial government. One important responsibility of the Board is to appoint both an Accreditation Committee and a Standards Review Committee. Each year, the Board appoints a new Accreditation Committee that oversees the policies and procedures of each member body. The Accreditation Committee must include at least five representatives: two from certifying bodies, one appointed by the BC Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Fisheries [BCMAFF], one member of a processing or distributing company, and one person from the public, such as a consumer or an environmental organization representative. Each certifying body submits an annual report to the Accreditation Committee including a copy of current standards and operating policies, members' location and contact information, the body's fee structure, and so on. While each body must follow a code of production that meets the minimum standard of COABC, they may also draft more stringent requirements at their discretion. Reviews conducted by the Accreditation Committee ensure that each certifying body is compliant with

COABC policy. Certifying bodies that meet the requirements of COABC minimum standard are permitted to run certifying programs that allow their members to market their products using the 'British Columbia Certified Organic' label.

COABC minimum standard is constantly being revised to ensure that the expectations codified in it appropriately reflect current circumstances. This task is carried out by a specially designated Standards Review Committee [SRC]. Each year, the Board of Directors works with member bodies to appoint a new SRC. Each certifying body has a right to have one of its members on the SRC, and the Board of Directors may also appoint a few more farmers or members from the public if it chooses. The SRC accepts proposals from COABC members, decides which proposals to address, and makes recommendations for standards amendments. The recommendations are available for public comment for a period and then adjusted accordingly. Final recommendations are made at the Annual General Meeting. A vote is then conducted among representatives of each certifying body before the Board of Directors finally decides which amendments will officially be made to the minimum standard. It is rare that the Board passes an amendment without the consensus of the certifying bodies.

In terms of enforcement, COABC requires each certifying body to bear the responsibility of ensuring that its growers are compliant with the certification standards used by their body. Each certifying body must do this by electing a certification committee that will visit farms to inspect practices and review records. The practice of review by committee had already been used by certifying bodies pre-COABC. In those days, certification was an entirely peer-reviewed process, meaning that inspections of farms were carried out solely by certifying body members. In other words, farmers

certified each other. With the creation of COABC, however, a new stipulation was introduced requiring each certifying body to conduct inspections by hiring a third-party verification officer. While certifying bodies may choose which verification officer they hire, the person must not be someone who is acquainted with members of the certifying body personally. Each body is strongly encouraged to switch officers every few years to prevent the development of friendships that might bias the certification process. Verification officers must submit a report on each farmer to the certification committee. The decision of whether or not a given farmer should be certified is then left to the deliberations of the committee.

Furthermore, the verification officer must be accredited by the Independent Organic Inspectors Association. The IOIA is a non-profit organization that was founded in the US in 1991 by inspectors who wanted to lend greater credibility to the North American organic movement. It established an inspector training program so that organic farmers would receive equal treatment and be subject to consistent expectations during inspections, regardless of the inspector. In 2000, IOIA collaborated with IFOAM to produce their *International Organic Inspection Manual*. This manual describes itself as "the most comprehensive text on organic inspection procedures and protocols", and is "intended to improve the quality and increase the consistency of organic inspections worldwide" (Riddle and Ford, 2000). By requiring IOIA accredited inspections, COABC aimed to make certification more impartial than it had previously been in order to enhance the perceived credibility of the 'British Columbia Certified Organic' label.

The founding of COABC was an exciting time. The tenets of soil building and ecological diversification advocated by organic farming pioneers had finally gained

recognition from the provincial government. And because the minimum standard would ensure that all certified producers met a baseline standard of production, provincially-accredited certification created a new and ostensibly more 'trustworthy' link between producers and consumers of organic food. By eliminating the possibility of organic products being marketed fraudulently, the promises of green consumption seemed within closer reach than ever before. Thanks to the credibility guaranteed by the 'British Columbia Certified Organic' label, ecologically-oriented farmers would be able to thrive in a wider market where environmentally-conscious consumers would actively support them.

However, this vision has not fully become a reality. Despite the impression of consensus and authoritativeness suggested by governmental accreditation of the 'British Columbia Certified Organic' standard, heated debates over the content, interpretation, and enforcement of the minimum standard remain ongoing within the organic community. In the following section, I will examine some of these debates as they are seen by the pioneering organic farmers I interviewed.

1.2 Criticisms of the Minimum Standard

The creation of COABC's minimum standard in 1993 represented a formalization of the shift of organic agriculture from a movement to an industry. Following the introduction of this minimum standard, many more farmers became certified and brought much more land under organic production. As mentioned earlier, between 1992 and 2003, the number of organic farmers in BC jumped from 154 to 442 (Macey, 2005). Such growth might lead one to speculate that commercialization has proven the perfect

strategy for pursuing the goals of the organic movement. But while it has helped to gain some advances, the minimum standard has also become highly contentious among organic farmers. This contention exists because the minimum standard imposes a single concept of organic production upon a diverse community of growers in which many differing, and often conflicting, concepts of 'organic' are at play:

There were a fair number of different certifying bodies around that all had their own standard. One of the main differences was in terms of transitional periods. Some certifying bodies required five years before you could call yourself certified, others wanted three, and I think there was one that required four years, but now COABC regulation has caused most to switch to three years. [...] Each farmer will interpret the standard separately. It's your own decision to pick what to use from the standard. Quite a few individual farmers have higher standards than what the COABC standard describes in terms of ecology. And the certifying bodies also interpret the standard differently. [Peter]

Because farmers (and consumers) often have differing views about what constitutes 'proper' organic farming methods, there is of course no way to create an organic standard that will satisfy everyone's expectations equally.

On one hand are organic ideals and the agrarian dream: in order to create an organic agriculture that is true to its philosophical roots, strong standards are necessary to regulate farming practices. But on the other hand, there are also strong incentives for making standards less strict rather than more strict. Because stricter standards are more detailed, they are harder for farmers to comprehend, as well as more difficult to inspect. Having to spend time, energy, and money following regulations and keeping records can hamper the ability of farmers to farm efficiently, which can in turn harm their productivity and prevent them from competing effectively. Furthermore, it must also be realized that inspection can only verify the integrity of farmers' practices to a limited degree:

If someone wants to cheat, somebody will always be able to do it. You can't just keep refining [regulations] and getting more detailed. If there's no trust, there's no business. [Gary]

Given the conflicting incentives towards the strictness of standards, it comes as no surprise that standard-setting is a highly politicized activity. Because it involves attempting to weigh the relative importance of so many different variables, farmers often disagree about what specific regulations should ultimately be included in a given standard.

Using examples pertaining to soil management, the erosion of agrarian ideals among organic farmers, and unremitting market pressures, I will argue in the following that the BC minimum standard emphatically does not reflect a common concept of 'organic' shared by all farmers. Rather, it represents a compromise among varying opinions on what 'organic' should mean, and I will show that it is one that has effectively diluted the radical potential organic agriculture represented during the early days of the organic movement. In light of this dilution one might wonder why a stricter standard of 'organic' was not chosen. The reason is that those who drafted the original minimum standard were unable to avoid including certain leniencies that could ease the transition from conventional to organic methods.

Building leniencies into the standard was an unavoidable, necessary measure. There is no fixed 'recipe' for organic farming; rather it is a subtle art learned through experience, and those new to its techniques cannot be expected to learn everything they will need to know immediately. Making the switch from conventional methods to organic ones is a transition requiring the accumulation of a great deal of knowledge, and new farmers need time to observe how the agroecosystems they work with respond to different techniques. Inexperienced transitional farmers often face exceptional

difficulties when first experimenting with organic techniques. In the absence of conventional means of managing natural conditions, each organic farmer must instead develop unique strategies and an improvisational capacity sensitive to the idiosyncracies of their land. They must find new ways to replenish the fertility of soils habituated to concentrated fertilizers, and to deal with weeds and pests without the crutch of conventional agricultural chemicals. Since a central motive for creating certification was to enroll more farmers in the organic movement, writing an overly complicated, bureaucratic standard would have been counter-productive.

Despite the necessity of leniencies, interviewees still took issue with the way the existence of the minimum standard has affected the practice of organic agriculture. They argued that certain provisions of the standard have actually undermined the potential of organic agriculture as a radical alternative to conventional agriculture. Under the minimum standard, they argue, 'organic' agriculture has gradually become more like the paradigm of conventional agriculture it was originally intended to oppose. In the following examples, I will examine some specific areas in which the compromise represented by these necessary leniencies continues to be controversial within the organic movement and the organic industry.

(i) Soil management controversies

Soil-building is perhaps the fundamental tenet of organic farming, yet interviewees asserted that unsustainable soil management practices are used widely on organic farms despite certification. But how could this be the case when Section 1.4 on the 'Principles of Organic Farming' listed in COABC's official management standards

states that the very aim of organic agriculture is to "maintain and increase long term fertility of soils" (COABC, 2005:12)? The reason is that while the minimum standard requires all farmers to incorporate soil-building techniques, *how* exactly they are to go about doing so is not made explicit. While growers must not use any substances prohibited under the 'Materials List', a great deal of discretion is left in the hands of individual certifying bodies to decide how much organic soil husbandry is enough. Indeed, when one consults Section 3.7 on 'Organic Soil Management', the complete entry on what is 'Required' simply states:

Soil building techniques designed to increase or maintain soil organic matter, optimise soil health, prevent erosion and prevent soil degradation" (COABC, 2005:28).

Lacking mention of any specific 'techniques', the language of this regulation is quite ambiguous. However, this ambiguity is yet another necessary compromise. This is because the composition and character of soil is contingent on so many local physical variables that a more precise definition would be too limiting. What constitutes an appropriate organic soil management technique depends on many variables. When developing an organic soil management strategy, each producer must assess the humus content, mineral content, acidity, and physical structure of the soil, and how these are influenced by local physical factors such as climate, altitude, slope, water cycles, crop rotations, and so on. Depending on the circumstance, any of a great number of different organic strategies may be appropriate for a given farmer on a given plot of land.

Interviewees commented on how the ambiguity of the soil management regulation leads to discrepancies in the practices different certifying bodies demand of farmers:

Some certifying bodies take the soil building aspect more seriously than others. With permanent crops such as fruit and nut trees you could use any cover crop and some committees will be happy, but others will not be happy and they'll say you have to grow something else to return organic matter to the ground, to replenish the availability of potassium and all these things. Of course it's very difficult to generalize. You have to adapt to the crop and the specific context. Wine grapes is one example where you don't want fertile soil because excessive nitrogen delays maturity and the flavour is not developed. [Peter]

I know some certifying bodies are fast-tracking new farmers and I don't think that's such a good idea. Some people with sandier soil got fast-tracked, but the thing is it takes a while to get to understand the organic system. It's a learning process and if someone comes into it cold turkey they're still quite green even after a few years. [Joe]

So while prohibited soil management practices are clearly identified, the standard is less direct about what one should do to cultivate fertility in the absence of convenient conventional methods.

Interviewees took issue with certain substances permissible under the 'Materials List'. They criticized reliance on such input substitutes as a factor that causes farmers to retain a conventional approach even though they are certified organic. They argued that although certified organic farmers have equal status under the law, fundamental disparities in their approaches can be distinguished by looking at the differences in the practices farmers actually employ. Bev, for instance, attacked the notion that farmers who rely on blood and bone meal fertilizers can be described as farming in an authentically 'organic' manner:

Chemical nitrogens are not allowed to be used on an organic farm, but at the same time you can go out there and spray blood meal which does exactly the same thing. A lot of the organic growers are still coming in with the conventional mentality of feeding the plants. New farmers just think 'in conventional agriculture [at a certain date] you spread nitrogen fertilizer so we better do the same thing, so we'll spread the organic equivalent'.

Blood meal and certain bone meal preparations are deemed allowable under the minimum standard because they are of 'natural' origin, however, they are nevertheless very powerful fertilizers that have comparable effects to conventional fertilizers on the soil. Like conventional fertilizers, these meals encourage quick plant growth but are also deleterious to soil ecology. Bev argued that their use unfortunately allows new farmers to maintain a conventional, input substitute-oriented approach to soil management.

Some farmers think they need to use bone meal or blood meal to get the green into their greens, or so they can plan to grow faster. One person I know said they needed to use bone meal because there was no nitrogen when they did their nitrogen test in March. But if they did a nitrogen test again in August, they would realize that by that time their corn would have made nitrogen available, and therefore really they didn't have to add bone meal. But a lot of farmers don't pay attention to that part of it. Our feeling on our farm is that if the soil can't sustain the plant growth, then obviously the soil is not ready to grow it, and we have to do more soil building.

Because these meals offer an easy way to fertilize the soil, their use preempts the need for new farmers to learn 'proper' organic techniques. Applied in the same manner and having the same effects as conventional fertilizers, blood and bone meal allow transitional growers to become certified organic without having to adopt a 'truly organic' paradigm.

Bev further pointed out the irony that blood and bone meal are in fact byproducts of conventional livestock production:

Two inches of blood meal is not coming from organic animals. And if you cannot use the animal waste from conventional animals, why are you allowed to use the blood meal and bone meal which are way more concentrated? I'm not allowed to use conventional manure because of hormones but I can use blood meal? What about E.coli and all the other pathogens that are in the blood and bone meal and all the storages of animals? Something's wrong. It's a sore point within the organic industry because a lot of growers feel they cannot grow without it.

Sourcing inputs from conventional factory farms effectively blurs the line between 'conventional' and 'organic'. If certified organic farmers feel they must meet their fertility

needs by relying on the off-farm purchase of byproducts of the conventional livestock industry, then how can organic farming really be regarded as an alternative paradigm?

Other interviewees further highlighted discrepancies they identified between their own concepts of organic and those embodied in the minimum standard:

Organic farming doesn't mean it's perfect, we don't live in a perfect world. It's a best effort. When people ask me do you use any chemicals or pesticides, I say no, but I tell them that some are allowed and you can use them and still be British Columbia Certified Organic. [Jim]

Chemicals aren't completely exempt under the minimum standard. You're allowed to use copper sulphate to stop potato blight, but you have to apply to a committee or inspector if you're going to use it. You can't use it to such an extent that it builds toxicity in the soil. So you could take it to the level where it's almost toxic, and to me that's kind of stretching it and pushing the rules, but it's allowed. [Joe]

Within the set of compromises necessary for the growth of the new organic industry, 'conventional' and 'organic' agriculture are no longer mutually exclusive terms. Rather, certified organic growers sometimes use similar chemicals to those used by conventional growers. This problematizes the assumption that certification guarantees that organic food is produced using methods distinct from conventional ones.

(ii) 'Only as organic as you have to be'

Rather than being treated as the prescribed 'minimum' or entry-level guide to organic production it was originally intended to be, the BC standard has instead become the norm of the industry. As new farmers have become certified, many of them have refrained from taking steps to go beyond the 'minimum' standard:

[Organic farming] is not just substituting blood meal for limestone ammonium nitrate, which a lot of people will do, they'll have this conventional farming attitude: 'oooh, plants need nitrogen, give plant nitrogen', you know, that doesn't work. The whole concept is you're feeding the soil, you're building the soil, you're building the life of the soil. So there's organic and there's organic, and some people are as organic as they have to be, and other people go many steps beyond because of what

they see is the true sustainability picture. [...] Certification is very precise in what you must do and not do, but a lot of people go way beyond those limits. Whereas other people, I mean they'll do what they've got to do to pass, really. [Jill]

In this quote, Jill points out that just because someone is certified, it does not necessarily mean that they are as 'organic' as they ought to be. Certified organic farmers do follow standards, but can choose merely to "do what they've got to do to pass", or even "farm unorganically" if they wish.

The implication of such statements is that as more farmers have entered the organic sector in search of financial gain, the quality of certified organic farming has been diluted:

I think people can get in and be certified but not sustainable and I think that's being done. It's taking the heart out of the organic business and it's more about doing it for the money. [Patty]

Organic farmers are people who believe in it enough to actually do it, to live it. Unfortunately, though, I shouldn't say that because there are organic farmers who are into it for the marketing angle. It is a marketing niche, it's become a huge growth industry and people are doing just because it's a way of selling vegetables at a higher price. [Jill]

I won't say "oh, don't buy your lettuce from them because they're not as organic as I am," because they are as organic as I am in the sense that they have passed regulations, it's just that their organic principles are not the same as my organic principles. [Bev]

The monocultural model of industrial agriculture has become fundamental to organic agriculture. The notion of on-farm inputs has become fuzzy at best and has been ignored in general as a tenet of organic agriculture. Originally, the inclination was to have diversity at any cost even if it cost you income or outlay. [Glen]

The 'British Columbia Certified Organic' label groups farmers who employ dissimilar practices into a single category. Yet certified organic farmers in BC are not always similarly capable, or even like-minded. Farm environments are diverse, and so are the strategies of farmers. The agrarian ideals sought by some farmers are not shared by other

ones, and these differences find expression in the different practices farmers use. Even the most rigorous certification standards must nevertheless remain partial, provisional ones subject to regular amendment. Because there is a limit to the level of detail it is practical to include in standards, some degree of subjective interpretation of organic standards cannot be avoided. This makes the consistent enactment of certification standards an incredibly challenging goal.

The creation of the minimum standard successfully attracted many new converts to organic farming. While this was a triumph for the organic movement, it was one that brought new complications. As the quotes above illustrate, interviewees expressed frank doubts about the extent to which the transitional process succeeds in ensuring that new farmers truly make a complete switch from conventional to organic farming. Because organic standards can impart only a general idea of how to farm organically, and because, as I will explain further in the following sub-section, market pressure compels farmers to sacrifice principles for productivity, certified organic agriculture does not do enough to move toward a sustainable form of agriculture.

(iii) The turn to exporting

The various disagreements among organic farmers I have just described have transpired in the context of increasing economic pressure on BC organic producers. As I have alluded throughout, an important factor that has contributed to the sacrifice of organic principles is the need to be productive to remain competitive in the market economy. As I described above, the leniencies and compromises within the minimum standard exist as a means of allowing organic farmers, especially new organic farmers, to remain competitive and efficient despite the inherently steep learning curve associated

with 'going organic'. But interviewees nevertheless disapproved of the turn to export-led organic agriculture that has increasingly shifted the impetus of the movement away from local marketing towards international marketing instead.

According to a market study commissioned by COABC, consumer demand for organic foods far outstrips locally sourced supply in BC (IMPACS, 2002). Yet the growth of local markets does not necessarily guarantee commercial access for local producers. Indeed, it appears that the recent emergence of larger organic farms is rapidly creating economic conditions in BC's organic sector that are less hospitable to small growers. From 2000-2003 the area of organic vegetable cultivation in BC leapt from 1340 acres to 2283 acres, "representing a 70% increase in three years, a result of large farms in the lower mainland converting to organic production" (Macey, 2004:9). The entry of larger organic farms puts pressure on smaller ones by lowering prices for organic products on one hand, and decreasing the availability of land and driving up land prices on the other. Increasing competition from organic imports is also a factor. There is now so much local and foreign competition facing BC organic growers that the incentive to increase productivity is ever-present.

This translates into a constant pressure to compromise principles in the name of speeding up crop output. But because it is much more efficient for distributors to source product from one large supplier rather than from many small ones, organic farmers often will not be able to sell through a distributor unless they yield high volumes:

The large guys are really hard to deal with. I haven't met anyone who's had a lot of success with the main distributors. One year I shipped I don't know how many tonnes of squash [to a big distributor] and they shoved it outside and said it was all bad. But it wasn't. There were maybe a few bad ones, but I don't think they stored them right. They store potatoes in the light and then they turn green and you can't use them, so they tell you to take them back. We've only managed to sell potatoes

[to another big distributor]. They get most of their stuff from California. The thing with California is that you can give one phone call down there and they'll bring up everything you need in one delivery. It's a lot easier to make one phone call and a fax than deal with lots of small producers. [Joe]

A store buyer for a natural food chain in the Okanagan told me his ideal is to have one selling desk where he'll just tick off whatever he needs, and the stuff is just dropped off at his three stores. From us, I offer him inconsistent supply and inconvenient delivery, so the trade-off is not good enough for him. It was a cheaper price, but it was inconvenient. [Glen]

Stiff competition creates a difficult situation for organic growers since the less they produce, the less access they will have to markets. This compels them to abandon organic principles in favour of more 'conventional'-looking measures in the attempt to enhance productivity.

In response to the growing competitiveness of the organic market, COABC has become increasingly oriented toward export markets as a way to perpetuate growth and 'build' the industry. But because measures taken to increase productivity often entail the sacrifice of labour-intensive organic principles, commitment to export-led growth is at odds with the agrarian values organic farming pioneers understand as integral to the real meaning of 'organic':

I personally feel that right now COABC's energy has gone to the global market and I'm really sad about that. I think it's necessary for some farmers but it's not necessary for all of us, and only a few are going to benefit. I think that we should first feed our local people, but economics comes into it and some people see they can make more money by shipping out of the country. [Bev]

As competition from imports has increased, many certifying bodies have become more focused on export markets in response. Though this strategy goes against the 'localism' espoused by pioneer organic farmers, it is one that some now argue is necessary if the organic movement is to progress.

The rationale is as follows. Since exporting requires more production, it leads to more organic farmers bringing more land under organic production, and better access to organic products for consumers. Exporting helps farmers by giving them access to distant markets when local ones may already be saturated. This also benefits consumers in areas where there are few local organic farmers or where organic production of certain crops is particularly difficult. As more supply is generated, organic products become more economical for the consumer, which in turn leads to increased market share as well as further potential for expanding organic production by penetrating markets dominated by conventional agriculture. So long as organic producers keep up a rapid pace of production, this dynamic could one day tip the balance such that most agricultural products would be of organic rather than conventional origin.

The radical agrarian perspective, however, holds that an export-led trajectory tends to disadvantage small producers. To remain competitive in this condition, small producers are forced to compromise their organic principles and privilege means that will increase yields instead. Interviewees argued that as BC's organic industry becomes more focused on export-led growth, there has been a tendency to lose sight of the agrarian vision of organic agriculture based on community relationships and rooted in local economies. In particular, they criticized the recent adoption of ISO 65 accreditation by some certifying bodies as indicative of a more general shift of BC's organic industry toward export-led development.

While organic products imported to BC are not required to comply with any particular certification standard, many international markets, including the highly

lucrative US and EU markets, now require all imports to comply with ISO 65.¹⁰ In order to maintain access to these export markets, some certifying bodies have gained ISO 65 accreditation. In 2001, four certifying bodies merged to form a new certifying body, the Pacific Agricultural Certification Society [PACS] in 2001.¹¹ PACS had an instant membership of 130 growers, making it by far the largest body in the province. PACS and FVOPA are the only two certifying bodies that have gained ISO 65 accreditation thus far.

All other certifying bodies currently remain ISO 61-accredited. The main difference between ISO 61 and ISO 65 accreditation lies in the manner in which inspection and approval of producers is carried out. Whereas bodies that follow ISO 61 requirements vote to decide which members from within their group will serve as their certification committee, to gain ISO 65 compliance it is necessary to hire an entirely independent certification committee consisting of members who do not belong to the certifying body and who do not have close relations with any farmers who belong to the certifying body. In both cases it is required that a third-party verification officer visit members' farms at least once a year, but since ISO 65 accreditation also requires that the administration of the certifying body itself be overseen by a certification committee composed of third-party individuals, this program is viewed as more credible.

However, this view is not shared by all:

[Certifying bodies following ISO 65 accreditation] want a bunch of technical people like college professors involved in this process because they don't want any sort of, I think, nepotism going on there. Which is fair enough, but nobody can judge the issues like the farmers can. [Jill]

¹⁰ ISO is the International Organization for Standardization, an international body that is heavily influential in the harmonization of production standards that facilitate global trade.

¹¹ The four certifying bodies that merged to form PACS in 2001 were OPACK, Comox Region Organic Producers [CROPS], Peace River Organic Producers Association [PROPA], and Caribou Organic Producers Association [COPA].

COABC used to be a lobby body but now they've made PACS and have made a certifying arm used particularly by processors and those who want to export. The movement we envisioned in 1986 is that certification would be locally-grounded and peer-reviewed and what has happened now is that it is being done using inspectors and a paid staff and you lose the grassroots credibility and the face-to-face relationships are severed. I feel quite badly but that's the direction things are heading because local farmers have been losing their market share to imports that comply with international standards. I don't think we need any more incentive to lose and depersonalize our personal relationships. [Anne]

ISO 65 accreditation facilitates the globalization of organic, and as such represents a significant step away from the original radical agrarian politics espoused by organic movement pioneers.

Market access through certification as it currently exists is insufficient to counter agricultural unsustainability because it fails to address the productivist biases embedded in the conventional food system. Agricultural supply chains remain accustomed to the high-yield paradigm of conventional agricultural production, and the case has largely become the same within the organic market. Retailers selling organic food now compete with each other by seeking out distributors who offer the lowest prices per unit. As a result, the new opportunities the organic market once represented for small growers have slowly but surely been usurped by large farms with the capital to invest in high-volume organic production.

This section has explored three examples of controversial issues that exist within the organic movement and the organic industry due to the compromises necessitated by the adoption of the minimum standard. These included questionable soil practices, producers who are only "as organic as they have to be", and the disadvantages to small producers in a market geared toward exports. While the introduction of certification did successfully propel organic agriculture into new markets and compel many previously

conventional growers to change to organic methods, the goals of organic movement pioneers remain far from complete. The line between organic and conventional inputs has been effectively blurred; many farmers have not chosen to see the minimum standard as 'minimum' but have instead used it only to ensure that they meet the criteria for certification without trying to go beyond it in any way. Except for the few niche markets where consumer preference for locally-produced goods may be found, productivism continues to reign. As the organic sector has taken the shape of a mainstream industry, many small producers have had to seek out other means of generating income, or have otherwise left farming altogether:

I really lament that people have left organic farming because they are ones who wanted to be alternative and they had their butts kicked. There hasn't been a support system to sustain small farms. Even though our group started with six originals and grew to seventy, and there was an increase every year, eventually it meant for every eight new ones in twelve would opt out. It's stabilized more in the last few years. From 1986 to 2000, which was the major growth period, many farms tried and failed. Some who quit were so dedicated and doing quality work, and they helped the industry so much. [Paul]

The very same farmers who founded the movement now express reservations about the impact that mainstream commercialization has had on the meaning and practice of organic agriculture in BC. Rather than successfully instantiating ecologically sustainable production and cultivating local connections between producers and consumers, the commercialization of organic agriculture in BC has instead seen a progressive assimilation of organic farming to the very practices it was supposed to oppose.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This thesis has explored how the practice of organic agriculture in BC has been shaped by the implementation of certification standards. I have argued that in order to understand how organic agriculture has shifted from a grassroots, community-oriented, alternative movement to a burgeoning and heavily regulated capitalist industry, an analysis of standards is essential. Based on my evidence, it appears that, as has been demonstrated by other studies, the commercialization of organic agriculture entailed a progressive abandonment of the radical agrarian ethic that originally inspired farmers to promote the organic movement. Standards were intended to strike a balance between principles and practice, but it is clear from my thesis that there is considerable disagreement about how that balance should be established. Ongoing conflict has caused political disputes to persist among farmers within BC's organic community. In this sense, the implementation of standards has not ended struggles to define 'organic', but only continued and at times exacerbated them.

The standardization of organic agriculture in BC has brought with it a host of unintended negative consequences that undermine the organic movement's ultimate goal of offering an explicitly radical alternative to conventional agriculture. One reason is that such standards offer only a limited capacity to uphold the less tangible 'holistic' values traditionally attributed to organic agriculture. Previous studies have shown that because standards objectify 'organic' according to narrow criteria based almost exclusively on the classification of inputs, they remove from consideration many features that are central to the philosophical foundations of organic farming (Guthman, 1998; Allen and Kovach, 2000). Such omissions cause commercial organic agriculture to be less faithful to

organic ideals than one might expect. Though standards may contain statements of 'principles' that espouse values such as promoting biodiversity, using renewable energy sources, and ensuring a good living for farmers, in the absence of formal requirements to oversee such outcomes, they have not been upheld by the market mechanism (DeLind, 2000).

Another issue is that as more actors have entered the organic sector and brought capital with them, economic competition increasingly has resulted in the amendment of organic standards. As more actors who do not share the radical sentiments of the founders of the movement have entered the organic market, standards have been gradually diluted to accommodate the interests of profit and efficiency at the expense of more rigorous practices recommended by organic farmers (Allen and Kovach, 2000; Guthman, 2004). This dilution of standards, in turn, has caused organic agriculture to become more and more akin to conventional agriculture as the organic market has grown.

Observers have been very critical of how standardization has worked to refashion organic agriculture from a radical movement into simply a new enterprise for capital accumulation: "Increasingly, the organic foods marketplace is beginning to look and feel much like the conventional marketplace. Price, rather than the total costs of production and stewardship, is once again reigning supreme" (DeLind, 2000:201). The problem is that standards-oriented regulation entails that general, often oversimplified solutions are provided for unique, place-specific problems: "There exists a gradient of practices between organic and conventional agriculture; any boundary drawn between the two is subject to interpretation and is thus a source of political struggle..." (Guthman, 1998:146). The absence of a single correct version of 'organic' creates perfect conditions for

struggles to take place between competing interests vying for influence in the organic market (Vos, 2000). The economic rules that structure the organic market, organic standards in particular, must therefore be understood as thoroughly cultural, and politically charged.

Standardization has become controversial because it assimilates organic agriculture to the dictates that govern industrial commodity production in general, where large capital investments, an emphasis on rapid, high-volume production, and long-distance trade are the norms of business. Yet the content of certification standards, as well as how they are amended as conditions change, are not predetermined. Rather they are products of social relations specific to certain times and places where any number of factors might affect what becomes included in the rules. Organic ideals are lost in the mix because the economy functions according to a limited vocabulary of 'supply and demand', 'efficiency', 'productivity', and so on, where evidently 'non-economic' categories such as 'biodiversity' or 'community' are excluded because they cannot easily be quantified (Guthman, 1998). Because 'organic' has been defined in a manner tailored to be intelligible by the preexisting 'culture' of the market, important meanings customarily attached to 'organic' have been largely excluded from contemporary discourse. The very act of standardization therefore invites into organic agriculture the corroding processes of conventionalization decried by critics (DeLind, 2000).

Because farming involves negotiating trade-offs between the quality and quantity of crop yields, many farmers who entered organic agriculture aiming to farm for quality have wound up failing because they could not produce on a large enough scale to attract the interest of wholesalers. While some smaller producers survive by cultivating

personal relationships with vendors, those who can boast neither large yields nor locally embedded connections face tremendous competitive pressure. Such pressure creates a strong incentive for certifying bodies to draft standards that are only as strict as they need to be so that producers can focus their energies on boosting yields to maintain market access. As I described earlier, this has enabled certified organic farmers to employ 'conventional' practices. In spite of the efforts of BC organic farmers to control the definition of 'organic', commercialization has nevertheless resulted in a compromising of organic principles in order to facilitate market-based growth. Market pressure from cheap imports coupled with an increasing push to capitalize on the growing global organic market has created an incentive to keep standards simple in order to make it easier for farmers to employ productivity-enhancing measures.

The early organic farming pioneers have stood up for a dream that has only been partially realized. It is thanks to their efforts that BC now boasts much greater number of organic farmers today than it could in the past. Yet, when I asked pioneering organic farmers to reflect on the direction organic agriculture in BC has moved over the past twenty years, negative assessments weighed in more heavily than positive ones. Though BC organic farmers may now employ improved practices from an environmental standpoint, certification has effectively integrated organic agriculture into the same logic of supply and demand that governs the conventional agricultural economy, and the economic well-being of many organic farmers remains tenuous. Though the movement has established its own niche market, the words of organic farmers themselves testify that the struggle to survive financially has continued to impede the realization of the movement's original agrarian ideals. Paul lamented the "ones who wanted to be

alternative... had their butts kicked." Glen reminisced about the 1970s: "we used to say it was desirable and necessary to be true to organic principles". Jane warned that in her local area, "it would only take one or two large farms to roll over and we'd all be dead. And it's going to happen." Anne talked about the difficulty of the two years it took her to rebuild her specialty salad business after "California's big farms invaded and swamped our market". Meanwhile, Jim, exasperated with the trials of staying afloat as a farmer, stated that he was "getting out" of farming. And in the time since my interview with him, Jim, one the most ardent organic farmers I met, and often cited as an important 'original' of the organic movement, has indeed quit farming. And because Paul has in the meantime refused to buy quota and pay levies demanded by the Egg Marketing Board (which are allocated exclusively to support conventional producers), he has recently been legally forced out of business.

The dilution of standards, the entry of larger economic players, and the loss of small organic farms illustrate how the ostensible 'economic success' of BC's organic movement is actually marred by troubling shortcomings. As strides have been made to streamline standardization and feed export markets, the original ideals of the organic movement's progenitors were left by the wayside. Amid the push to build the organic market by implementing standards across increasingly large geographical areas, the possibility of realizing organic ideals as conceived by pioneer farmers seems increasingly remote.

If certification has thus far given rise to an organic agriculture that is only partially 'alternative', it seems clear that other measures beyond faith in the invisible hand of the market will be necessary to enact reforms through organic agriculture. Fortunately,

some organic sector participants have experimented with other alternative geographies of food provision that bypass the mainstream market. Typically, such alternative geographies hinge on personal trust-based relationships, although certification often remains important even in these transactions. For instance, farmers' markets are burgeoning in BC, and many producers and consumers go there explicitly to make contacts with local farmers. Forming these relationships can offer great security for farmers not only because they afford quick returns, but also because they create novel opportunities for the exchange of information. Consumers can tell producers what products they want, and producers can educate consumers about farming issues. Such knowledge exchange can culminate in beneficial alliances that bolster community food security. The formation of the Vancouver Food Policy Task Force in 2004, for instance, which includes two members of city council on its board, successfully came into being in part because the current strength of farmers' markets in the Vancouver region helped to demonstrate the existence of enough 'demand' among the population for deeper municipal involvement in cultivating local agricultural initiatives.

Another example of an alternative to mainstream food distribution is provided by the case of a certain broker operating in the Lower Mainland. This broker has an explicit political mandate: to find markets for organic growers who are too small to sell consistently to large wholesalers that demand large volumes of product before they will do business. The broker finds out what quantities of various fresh crops are required by different retailers, and then asks growers how much they can produce of these same crops during a given season. When these numbers are known, the broker then gets contracts for the growers such that stores end up being supplied by a large number of different small

producers rather than by a few large ones. This eliminates the risk farmers must normally take when choosing which crops to plant. While it is especially important for small growers to choose crops that they think will sell, they usually have no way of knowing how many other growers will plant the same crops. By coordinating supply and demand in advance, the broker prevents detrimental market gluts from occurring. Organizing these flows is logistically challenging, since instead of dealing with just a few large producers, the broker must orchestrate the delivery to market of food produced by numerous small growers in disparate places. Yet this strategy has been extremely effective, and a number of interviewees actually credited the broker with single-handedly saving many small organic growers from going bankrupt.

While it is encouraging to note that some actors heavily embroiled in the politics of the organic market are taking active steps to preserve the viability of small-scale, labour-intensive organic farming, the question of public support for local farmers will likely become critical to the future of organic farmers in BC. As corporations become more involved in organics, falling prices might soon stand to force out the small farmers who currently remain. While there is certainly a place for large organic farms, steps should be taken to prevent the disappearance of small organic farms at the hands of economistic commercialism. A cultural reassessment of the value we place on agriculture is in order. If an appreciation of the worth of farming that is not resource-dependent, ecologically damaging, or dangerous for farm workers could be gained, the possibility that small growers will survive will increase. Toward this end, farmers should continue to organize themselves to educate consumers about the politics of certification and issues related to organic farming more generally. Support in the form of simple

policy measures such as providing subsidies for transitional growers or giving tax breaks to organic growers could make a great difference. In short, reliance on certification as the arbiter of authentic 'organic' production is not enough to ensure the enactment of an alternative to conventional agriculture. Instead, continued efforts to raise awareness of the complexity of agricultural issues will be necessary to confront the challenges originally raised by pioneer organic farmers.

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