A Look at California Organic Farms
カリフォルニアにおける有機農業の普及

Contemporary Society Group
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Introduction

To develop a vision of a society that is ecologically sound and socially just – one of the objectives of the Contemporary Society Group of the Long-Term Sustainability through Place-Based, Small-scale Economies project – it is essential that we look at the systems that produce our food. There are many important questions to ask about how agrifood systems are constituted and contested, by whom, using whose knowledge, and to what consequence. In my fieldwork in Japan, I focus on socio-technical conflicts about food safety surrounding radioactive nuclides in food and farmland, and the question of whose knowledge prevails in dealing with food safety crises. In my project in California, I am looking at how the expansion of organic food production and markets is interpreted and experienced by organic farmers who support the values of ecological and social integrity, and how they respond to the competition that is part of the growing market. This short article describes insights from an early phase of fieldwork in the Central Coast area of California.

A Glance at the Industrialization of Organic Farms

The first few times I went grocery shopping in Berkeley, I was surprised by the widespread availability of organic products – not only at the farmers market, where I would normally expect to find them, but at chain stores like Safeway, Wal-Mart, Target, and Costco. Indeed, government statistics suggest that organic products are sold in three out of four supermarkets in the US[i]. This is very different from Japan, where I would generally go to a natural store or a co-op store to “seek out” organic vegetables. I immediately got the sense that organic products are booming in California. Though other shoppers told me that Berkeley is very different from other places in California or the rest of the US, still I was amazed and overwhelmed by the accessibility and the availability of organic products. I do not feel that I have to seek out organic products, because they are literally everywhere.

Farmer's Market

Supermarket

Once the initial feeling of surprise faded, I began to notice the distinct “identities” of the organic vegetables – some sold without any packaging, others packed neatly in plastic packages; some from local farms, and others from other countries such as Mexico. Just looking at a photo taken at a farmers market and a photo from a supermarket, readers can tell that the vegetables probably

came to these places through different supply chains and from different points of origin. So now the questions naturally arise: Who is producing this bounty of organic produce? How have the products gotten to where they are?

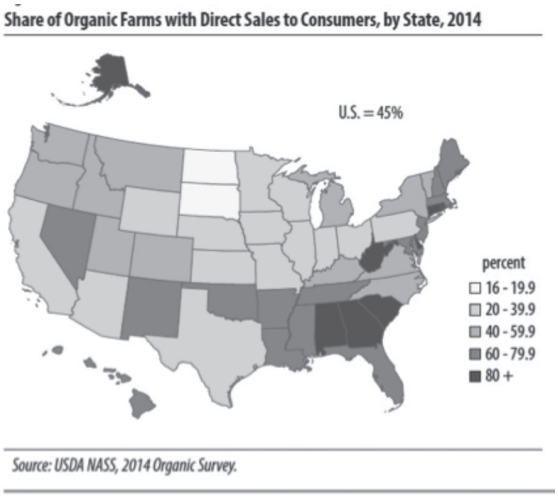
We can find partial answers in the literature that describes the industrialization of agriculture. This phenomenon has been documented extensively, and is demonstrated by analyses of the evolution of farm structure and of the economic performance of the farming and food processing, distribution, and retail sectors. The literature suggests that through the industrialization of agriculture, the balance of power has shifted from farmers to food processors, and from food processors to the retail sectors[ii]. Corporate capital is now flowing into the organic sector, furthering the industrialization of American food systems (Howard 2009). These processes, known as "the conventionalization of organic farming," are having significant consequences for the local food systems which were built by the organic movement: replacing small farms with large farms, family farms with corporate farms, and direct relations between farmers and consumers with anonymous market relations within the organic sector (Buck et al. 1997; Guthman 2014). These macro structural changes are taking place beyond question, but what has not been much discussed is how the increasing spread of organic products is experienced by organic family farmers, and the ways in which they respond to these developments in light of their core values.

California Organic Farms

When I began to look into information about American organic farming, I came across the 2014 Organic Survey by the National Agricultural Statistics Service of the United States Department Agriculture, the most recent survey of organic production. Efforts to collect and compile numeric data on the state of organic farms appear to be relatively recent phenomena compared to the data on conventional farms, and there are methodological issues with the ways in which the data is compiled. For instance, even though some other data and information are found in the 2007 and 2012 Census of Agriculture, because of the ways in which the definition of "organic" varied in the past, reliable data comparisons cannot be made[iii] . But I must say that even so, the data available in the US is much more extensive and accessible than what I find in Japan.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the various facts and figures given in the 2014 survey indicate in several different ways that the highest concentration of organic farms in the United States is in California. These statistics confirmed for me that California is indeed the leading organic state both in terms of the number of organic farms and in terms of sales of organic products. However, when you look at the share of organic farms with "direct sales to consumers," a category which includes sales at farm stands, farmers' markets, and

Figure 1.



community supported agricultural arrangements, etc., the data show that the share of farms selling directly to consumers was highest in southeastern and northeastern states, not in California (See Figure 1). This is evidence that a relatively smaller proportion of organic farmers sell directly to consumers, and that a higher proportion of organic farmers sell their products to other entities such as buyers for supermarkets and natural food stores or wholesalers and other farm operations, not directly to consumers. I need to dig into the data further, but the comment I heard from one organic farmer, "I sold more than half of my vegetables to coolers," attests that farmers

do see wholesalers as an important channel for selling their products, which are most likely packed and shipped outside California or even abroad via a cooler chain. This piece of information was an indication that the familiar scene of farmers or vendors selling at farmers markets in Berkeley represents only a fraction of the organic farmers in California; nevertheless, as I felt the energy and saw the vibrant activities taking place at the farmers market, I wanted to think that something is happening on the ground, a force that can resist the shift from small to large farms and from family to corporate farms – a force which may not be entirely visible.

Finding "Small Farmers"

With these thoughts and questions in mind, my research assistant Alisha Eastep and I have tried to find "small farmers" in the Central Coast of California. A challenge I initially faced was to figure out who the small farmers are, and whether the farmers I have met fit into this analytical unit of "small farmers." The USDA suggests that a "small family farm" is a farm whose sales are less than $350,000 a year. Even though this is a great analytical category to fit into the project theme of "small economies," in reality sales quotas are not an appropriate topic to raise in interviews, and variations in land area and types of farms made the question analytically problematic. Instead of using the government categories, we looked for organic farmers whose core values are in line with the principles of health, ecology, fairness and care – organic agriculture principles stated in the International Foundation for Organic Agriculture (IFOAM) preamble. As a way of identifying small farms, I looked for family-owned farms or family-oriented farms who use farmers markets and/or CSAs as primary marketing channels. Once we found one farmer, We relied on a method called the snow ball sampling method – asking each person I interviewed to introduce me to other people they knew who would be appropriate subjects for interviews.

As I made progress with the project, it struck me that the organic farmers I was introduced to seemed to be relatively young and also diverse – sometimes women, sometimes Asian Americans, and sometimes immigrants from Mexico. Indeed, the 2014 survey indicates that organic farms have more gender and age diversity than do non-organic farms; women make up about 18 percent of the farm operators for organic farms, compared to 16 percent for conventional farms, and the average age for organic farmers is 53 years old, compared to 58 years of age for conventional farmers. These statistics lead me to believe that my experiences probably reflect the demographics of the world of organic farming fairly well.

Visits to Organic Farms

I can hardly believe how much I've driven since I came to California: numerous visits to organic farms and open farm events organized by organic farmers during the past four months. Alisha and I have been in and around towns in the Bay Delta and Central Coast regions. Sometimes a farm is tucked in in the midst of beautiful rolling hills, surrounded by trees and water, and located relatively close to residential areas. Other times an organic farm is in the middle of a huge section of land which appears to consist of large scale conventional farms, far away from residential areas and commercial districts. The striking contrast between these two types of locations made me realize that the geographic location of one's farm – a matter over which farmers may not always have a choice – has significant consequences when it comes to making organic farming an economically viable enterprise.

Amongst the numerous visits we have made, which I will be reporting on at other occasions, my latest visit was to Salinas to meet organic farmers who are participating in the incubator farm programs of the Agriculture, & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA). Founded in 2001 ALBA stands out with its unique activities designed with the goal of providing a range of support to help minority and low-income farmworkers to become farm owners. Prior to my visits to ALBA, I had heard the name of the organization on

various occasions such as the open farm events and also academic seminars. The fact that this organization's name is on so many people's lips is a sign that people do recognize its great work (http://www.albafarmers.org/index.html). We met with Christopher Brown, Executive Director, and Nathan Harklerroad, Agricultural Education Program Manager, who explained to me their

A Farm in Watsonville

Drive to Salinas

incubator program, their vision of an ideal food system, and the role of ALBA within that model. One of the important missions is to help support famers who used to be laborers to become farm owners. Thus far, approximately 400 people have graduated from its Farmer Education Course and 40-50% of the incubator program graduates are farming independently. I was later introduced to three farmers who currently rent land from ALBA.

The farmers I met all used to be laborers picking strawberries on other people's farms. They currently are growing organic vegetables such as kale, romaine lettuce, chard, zucchini, etc., and also trying out the farming of organic strawberries. Some want to buy land in the US and have their own ranches, and others want to return to Mexico. Through hearing their experience and stories, I learned that their days are filled with continuous work on the farm – activities such as watering their parcels and checking their crops. Organic farming is demanding work, requiring that one combat weeds and pests, harvest produce at the right time, make contacts so as to sell the produce, and also learn new techniques and farming methods, etc. The hard work does not necessarily pay off, as the outcome is affected by unpredictable factors such as droughts and flooding, and other times affected by market competition, but still, "It is worth it" was a common refrain. I wondered why the farmers were so enthusiastic about pursuing organic farming. The farmers said that when they worked for somebody else whose farms used pesticides and insecticides, they saw either their coworkers or themselves affected. They felt that their immunity was compromised, resulting in skin rashes and other symptoms. They have no proof of the cause of such problems, but they felt that the problems were most likely triggered by the chemicals they used on the farms. The comment that “I want my family to be well” indicates their genuine concern about the use of chemicals.

Since the farmers I met are in an incubation program, they are entitled to sell their produce to ALBA. In fact, around 50-60% of their produce is sold to ALBA, and ALBA is responsible for marketing their produce, so they are not directly

faced with market competition. Nevertheless, I asked a set of questions revolving around their responses to the consequences of the increasing conventionalization of organic farming. Among various responses, one thing that stood out to me was that they use the network of family and also the network they built when they were in ALBA's education program when they are challenged with contingencies and competitions. For instance, Rufino Ventura mentioned to me that when he first began farming by renting ALBA land, his brother came from Mexico to help him out. He reflected upon the experience of the first few months when he started to farm independently and said that without his brother's help, he would have been unable to make it. Now that he is used to his surroundings and he spends less time on the farm, he no longer needs his brother's help, so his brother went back to Mexico. "I am so grateful to my brother," Rufino said repeatedly. Similar comments were made by Sophia Colin, who also farms with her husband and sometimes gets help from her son.

Harvesting time for strawberries is the most challenging time of the year for strawberry farmers, requiring strategic management of farms. In this regard, it seems as if the consequences of the conventionalization of organic farms have less to do with competition to sell produce than with competition to hire laborers. When these small organic farms need help, so do others such as corporate farms. When the labor supply is short and when the farmers are faced with problems, their colleagues from the ALBA program are the ones that they can rely on. These stories indicate that for these farmers, running a farm requires resources from outside the institutionalized system – resources such as family ties and self-help among colleagues. A comment made by Misael Morales puts a finger on this element: "Competition is difficult… but it boils down to building connections with clients. Big companies have relations with other big companies. I believe that building connections with people is important, not a product connection." His comment lingered in my mind, and I came to realize that this model – mobilizing family and relying on interpersonal ties and community resources to weather difficulties – reflects very closely the principles on which the organic farming movement was originally built. These farms embody the reality of small-scale, place-based, sustainable farming that strengthens the fabric of community at the same time that it provides nourishing organic food.

We will be conducting interviews with local organic farmers until the end of January 2016.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank ALBA and the farmers in the incubation program for sharing their experience and stories. Photos and names of interviewees are included in the article with their permission. Reprinting or other use of photos or of the text of this article requires the author's permission.

(i) Organic Market Review downloaded from http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/natural-resources-environment/organic-agriculture/organic-market-overview.aspx on December 14, 2015.

(ii) Some examples are found at the website of Economic Research Service of USDA; http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/ natural-resources-environment/organic-agriculture/readings.aspx#distribution.

(iii) See "2012 Census Drilldown: Organic and Local Food", a blog by National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, available at http://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/2012census-bfr-drilldown.