

Organic Farms: The Roots of Sustainable Communities¹

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Every couple of hundred years throughout human history, societies have gone through “great transformations”. These great transformations begin with growing public awareness that things that seemed to work in the past aren't working any longer, and aren't likely to work in the future. What begins as a call for institutional change grows into an imperative for fundamental reform, not just the normal changes in policies, technologies, or strategies, but a change in understanding of how the world works and where humans fit within it. Changes in societal “worldview” change the way people feel, think, and act and eventually change virtually every aspect of human life.

I believe the transformation we are experiencing in modern society, including modern agriculture, today is at least as important as the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s, perhaps as important as the beginning of science in the early 1600s, maybe as great as the transition from hunting and gathering to farming. I'm an old man and I have seen many changes during my 74 years. But, the changes I've experienced are not even remotely comparable to the changes I believe today's young people will see during their lives. People born in the mid-21st century won't even be able to imagine the world of today – including farms and food systems of today.

Today's great transformation is being driven by questions of sustainability. How can we meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future? How much longer can we keep doing what we are doing? I believe these will be the defining questions of the 21st century. When we ask these questions of sustainability earnestly and honestly, we must come to the inevitable conclusion: We are not even meeting the basic needs of many people today, and we most certainly aren't leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. We can't keep doing what we have been doing for much longer. Fundamental change is no longer just an option; it is an absolute necessity. Our current way of life is not sustainable.

Nowhere is the lack of sustainability clearer – yet less understood and appreciated – than in our systems of farming and food production in the United States. We are told by the agricultural establishment³ that our food system is the envy of the world. U.S. consumers spend less than 10% of their disposable incomes on food, arguably less than in any other nation. Our supermarkets are filled year-round with an abundance and variety of fresh and processed food products from every corner of the earth. Our food is quick, convenient, and cheap. Why would we want to change the American food system?

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³ The “agricultural establishment” refers to the large agribusiness corporations, agricultural commodity organizations, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and state Departments of Agriculture.

First, the current abundance of food has been made possible by the *industrialization* of American agriculture. Many people equate industrialization to the migration of people from farms and rural communities to find manufacturing jobs in urban areas. However, the shift from agrarianism to urbanism is only a symptom of the industrial model or paradigm, which is characterized by specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. Specialization increases efficiency by facilitating “division of labor” – each person specializing in fewer things can do them faster and better. Standardization is then necessary to facilitate coordination, routinization, and mechanization of specialized production processes. Standardization simplifies production and management processes, allowing consolidation of control into large-scaled, eventually corporately-controlled, business enterprises. This is the basic industrial process by which “economies of scale” have been achieved in agriculture as well as manufacturing.

The industrialization of agriculture made it possible for fewer farmers to produce more food, thus “freeing,” in many cases forcing, farmers to find employment in the factories and offices of a growing industrial economy. Admittedly, agricultural industrialization has resulted in tremendous increases in economic efficiency and total agricultural production. The basic problem is that industrial agriculture has also brought many unintended ecological, social, and economic consequences.

Industrial agriculture is inherently reliant on non-renewable fossil energy, chemically-dependent monoculture cropping systems, and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. We see the ecological consequences of such practices in eroded and degraded soils, polluted streams and groundwater, depleted streams and aquifers, and the growing threat of global climate change. In addition, the readily accessible sources of fossil energy have been depleted, and fossil energy will be less available and more costly in the future. The negative consequences of “fracking” for oil and natural gas are but the latest example of the growing ecological and social costs of our continuing dependence on fossil energy. Industrial agriculture is driven by profits, not ethics, and thus shows utter disregard for the other living and non-living things of the earth upon which the sustainability of food production ultimately depends.

We see the socioeconomic consequences of industrial agriculture in the demise of independent family farms and the social and economic decay of rural communities, as the farms grow larger in size, fewer in numbers, and increasingly corporate-controlled. In addition, the most basic human rights of self-determination and self-defense are systematically denied to rural residents who are forced to live with clear and compelling threats to public health associated with large factory farms.¹ “Right to farm” laws were never meant to ensure the right to operate “farm factories” that pollute the air and water with toxic chemical and biological wastes. Industrial farming is about the economic bottom-line, and there is no economic value in doing anything solely to protect either society or nature – the foundations of economic sustainability.

Second, but less widely recognized, the so-called modern, industrial food system has been an absolute failure in its most fundamental purpose. It has failed to provide domestic “food security”: To ensure that all have access to an adequate quantity of safe, wholesome food to support healthy, active lifestyles. A larger percentage of people in the U.S. are “food insecure” today than during the 1960s, with 15% of adults and more than 20% of U.S. children living with

the constant threat of hunger in food insecure homes.² The “Green Revolution,” which also relies on industrial farming methods, has similarly failed to bring food security to developing countries of the world. Millions of once self-sufficient, subsistence farmers, forced from the land by competition from factory farms, remain unemployed in urban slums.

In addition, the only foods affordable for many lower-income families are high in calories and lacking in essential nutrients, leading to an epidemic of obesity and other diet-related health problems. Obesity-related illnesses, such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and various forms of cancer, are projected to claim about one-in-five dollars spent for health care in the U.S. by 2020 – erasing virtually all of the gains made in improving public health over the past several decades.³ The irresponsible use of agricultural chemicals, growth hormones, antibiotics, and a multitude of additives in industrial foods add to a growing list of diet-related illnesses. Health care in America already consumes more than 17% of the total GDP or economic output, nearly twice as much as in 1980.⁴ If past trends continue, health care would claim more than one-third of all economic output by 2040. As much as half of this cost is likely related in one way or another to the American diet. We simply can't afford the high and rising costs of more cheap food. The industrial food system, including industrial agriculture, is not sustainable.

Admittedly, many people are still living in denial of the need for a fundamental change in the agriculture or in the general economy. Those in agriculture look to some a new technological revolution, such as genetic engineering or GPS-guided precision farming, to somehow solve the growing ecological and social problems. They persistently deny the need for a new worldview or a change in basic ways of thinking that would ultimately change their way of life. They cling to the false hope that human ingenuity will somehow be able to repeal the fundamental laws of nature that conflict with the core principles of the industrial paradigm of economic development.

However, the tide of public opinion is slowly turning toward a new and different worldview. An increasing number of people are beginning to understand that human beings are an integrally interrelated part of the earth, not beings apart from the earth. They are beginning to understand that we must learn to live in harmony with nature, rather than try to conquer nature. They are beginning to realize that human happiness arises from balance and harmony among the ethical, social, and economic aspects of life, not ever-greater income or wealth. We saw the beginning of the current reversal with the environmental, civil rights, and peace movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Understandably, those in positions of economic and political power have fought back in defense of the status quo. However, the financial collapse of 2008 and continuing economic stagnation has once again fanned the fires of public demands for fundamental change.

In agriculture, we have seen the forces of change most clearly in the modern organic movement, which also began in the U.S. in the 1960s but didn't gain widespread support until the sustainable agriculture movement emerged in the 1980s. Organic food sales in the U.S. grew rapidly during the 1990s and early 2000s, averaging 20%-plus per year and doubling every three to four years. With the economic recession of 2008, growth rates declined and stabilized at around 10% per year, reaching \$31.5 billion in sales by 2012.⁵ While organic sales still account for less than 5% of total food sales in the U.S., organic fruits and vegetables claim over 12% of their markets – an impressive accomplishment in a nation dominated by industrial agriculture.

The defenders of the agricultural status quo also have attempted to first stop and then co-opt the organic food movement. The early organic movement was about replacing a mechanical, industrial agriculture with a biological, sustainable agriculture – a permanent agriculture for a permanent human society. It began as a group of small, back-to-earth farmers and small, cooperative natural foods retailers who cultivated trusting relationships with their customers. As organic sales grew, economic pressures brought on a call for uniform national organic standards, which opened up organic production and distribution to large, specialized farming operations and mainstream supermarkets. By 2007, the mainstream supermarkets had taken over 47% of the organic foods market, 46% was controlled by specialty supermarkets, such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's. Direct sales through small coops, farm stands, and farmers markets were left with just 7% percent of the organic market.⁶ The organic food system had become industrialized.

Organic farming also had become similarly dominated by large, specialized, “industrial organic farms.” As organic farmer and writer Elliott Coleman has pointed out, “Since the 1930s, organic farming has been subjected to the traditional three-step progression that occurs with any new idea directly challenging orthodoxy. First, the orthodoxy dismisses it. Then it spends decades contesting its validity. Finally, it moves to take over the idea.”⁷ When the industrial food system was finally forced to recognize the growing consumer preference for organic foods, it decided to abandon its opposition and attempt to take control of organic food production and distribution. So far, it seems to be succeeding.

Historically, organic farming was as much a philosophy of life as a means of producing food. It reflected an anti-industrial, “organic worldview.” Organic farming has its philosophical roots in biodynamic farming, first articulated in 1924 by philosopher Rudolph Steiner in a series of lectures.⁸ “Central to bio-dynamics is the concept that a farm is healthy only as much as it becomes an organism in itself – an individualized, diverse ecosystem guided by the farmer, standing in living interaction with the larger ecological, social, economic, and spiritual realities of which it is part.”⁹ The term *organic* referred to the organization of the farm as a living *organism*. In addition, biodynamic farming was clearly spiritual as well as biological. Steiner was concerned that food grown on increasingly impoverished soil could not provide the inner sustenance needed for spiritual health.

Organic pioneer and publisher, J. I. Rodale, wrote, “The *organiculturist* farmer must realize that in him is placed a sacred trust, the task of producing food that will impart health to the people who consume it. As a patriotic duty, he assumes an obligation to preserve the fertility of the soil, a precious heritage that he must pass on, undefiled and even enriched, to subsequent generations.”¹⁰ Sir Albert Howard began his classic book, *An Agricultural Testament*, with the assertion, “The maintenance of the fertility of the soil is the first condition of any permanent system of agriculture,” which is the foundation of any permanent society.¹¹ He contrasted the regenerative agriculture of the Orient at the time with the agricultural decline that accompanied the fall of the Roman Empire, which “failed because it was unable to maintain the soil in a fertile condition.” He concluded, “The farmers of the West are repeating the mistakes made by Imperial Rome.” Organic farming was not just an occupation, it was a sacred trust.

When this trust between industrial organic farmers and consumers in the U.S. was violated, the “local food movement” emerged to become the “new organic.” Like the early organic

farmers, many organic consumers were, and still are, concerned about the ecological and social integrity of the food system. As organic production moved to larger farms and into mainstream markets, organic consumers increasingly looked to farmers in their own communities to ensure the ecological and social integrity of their food. The local food movement began with roadside stands, farmers markets, and Community Supported Agriculture programs or CSAs. New food-related cooperatives have since helped facilitate the growth in local foods. A 2008 food industry study estimated that sales of local foods had grown from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2007 and were projected to reach \$11 billion by 2011.¹² Local foods have replaced organics as the most dynamic sector of the U.S. food market.

The growing popularity of local foods is most visible in the growing numbers of farmers markets and CSAs. USDA statistics indicate the number of farmers markets in the U.S. increased from 1,755 to 8,144 between 1994 and 2013, increasing more than four-fold in less than 20 years.¹³ Current estimates by the *Local Harvest*¹⁴ organization indicate there were 2,700 CSAs in the U.S. in 2009, compared with less than 100 in 1990.¹⁵ The 2007 Census of Agriculture indicated about 12,500 farmers had sold products through CSAs. This reflects the growing number of multi-farm CSAs or collaboratives, where farmers pool their production to better serve their customers in rural communities and urban areas. The local food movement is evolving to better meet the needs of more people – both farmers and consumers.

The potential for a new and different food system of the future can be seen most clearly in the growing number of local foods cooperatives or collaborations between farmers and consumers. Examples include, *Grown Locally*,¹⁶ *Idaho's Bounty*,¹⁷ *Viroqua Food Coop*,¹⁸ and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*.¹⁹ The Oklahoma Food Cooperative website lists 20 similar cooperatives in other states. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service lists over 230 multi-farm “food hubs.”²⁰ By cooperating, farmers can offer a wide variety of local products with purchase and delivery options ranging from CSA shares to on-line orders of individual items. All of these organizations provide opportunities to link purchasers of local foods to specific farms and farmers. These new food systems range in scope from local to state or regional in size and from a dozen or so to hundreds of farmer/consumer members. I believe these innovative organizations provide a compelling vision for a sustainable future for food and farming.

The so-called experts tend to underestimate the importance of the local food movement. The local food movement is about far more than freshness and flavor, food safety and nutrition, or support for the local farmers and the local economy – the most frequently mentioned reasons for buying from local farmers.²¹ Local food is a means of reclaiming the ecological and social integrity of organics. The local food movement is restoring a “sense of community” by reconnecting friends and neighbors who are also regaining a “sense of place” or connectedness with the earth through local farmers. This sense of community that characterizes both local food and *authentic* organic foods is an essential aspect of the new ecological and social worldview of sustainability. As with authentic organics, local foods cannot be standardized or defined by a set of definitions or rules, such as “food miles” or distance traveled. *Local* is an expression of the social and ecological aspects of the new worldview essential for agricultural sustainability.

The challenge of the future will be to replace the industrial food system with a network of community-based, sustainable food systems. Many of today's local “food hubs” will need to be

“scaled-up” to achieve greater economic efficiency. A fundamental question is how much they can be scaled-up without sacrificing food safety and quality or losing the economic benefits they provide for people in their local communities. How large can they become without losing their social sense of community or their ecological sense of place? At some point in the growth process, the emphasis must shift from scaling-up to achieve economic efficiency to replication and reproduction, keeping the size of each organization consistent with social and ecological integrity. Regional, national, and even a global network of local, community-based food systems must be made up of cooperative organizations small enough to retain their social and ecological integrity. Networks of community-based food systems seem our best hope not only for a sustainable food system but also for sustainable communities.

The sustainability of local/organic food systems will depend on the integrity of personal relationships within the communities they sustain and which sustain them. The sustainability of food freshness, flavor, safety, nutrition, and of economic and social benefits for communities and societies all depends on sustaining the integrity of relationships among farmers, customers, society, and the integrity of their relationships with the earth. Relationships of integrity – creating and maintaining them – will be the most important challenge in creating the sustainable communities needed to sustain a new sustainable community-based food system.

If rural communities can meet this challenge, they will also be revitalized economically by new employment opportunities. All legitimate approaches to sustainable farming are more management intensive than industrial farming. The de-industrialization of agriculture will substitute labor and management for capital and off-farm technologies, reversing the industrial process. It will take more farmers to maintain the natural fertility and health of the land, and thereby, to reduce reliance on commercial pesticides and fertilizers. It will take more farmers to produce a given quantity of output on a diversified livestock/crop farm that produces food without polluting the environment. It will take more people to market directly to consumers and to begin to rebuild local food systems, which not only re-link farmers and local people but return more of the food dollar to local farmers and keep more food dollars in local communities. A sustainable agriculture will support more people on farms and more people in rural communities.

The emergence of a new sustainable/organic/local agriculture paradigm doesn't mean that rural communities of the future can depend on agriculture alone, as some did in the past. Sustainable natural ecosystems are inherently diverse; thus sustainable rural communities and economies will be diverse as well. That said, a sustainable agriculture can provide a solid ecological, social, and economic foundation upon which diverse sustainable rural economies and communities can be built. Many people will be seeking places to live that provide open-spaces, scenic landscapes, clean air and water, a degree of privacy, but also friendly community members with whom they can connect and interact. In addition, sustainable farming will be compatible with other forms of economic development that rely on the unique creativity and productivity of the human mind, rather than on exploitation. Sustainable community-based food systems can provide a new purpose for people to choose to work and live in rural places.

Community-based food systems also can help build sustainable suburban and urban communities. People need not be close neighbors to develop meaningful connections and urban consumers can reconnect with the land indirectly through personal connections with “their

farmers.” The key to socially sustaining relationships of integrity is a sense of personal connectedness, not necessarily the proximity of residence. In the post-industrial era of economic development, many people will be able to carry out their work from anywhere they might choose to live. Many people have come to prefer an urban lifestyle, regardless of their employment opportunities, and local food systems provide opportunities to regain a sense of connected essential for sustainable communities in urban and suburban “places.”

The key to a successful transition from industrial to sustainable farms, foods, and communities will be to remain true to the “organic roots” of the great transformation. The worldview of sustainability is biological or organic rather than industrial or mechanistic. Sustainable farms of the future must be philosophically organic, regardless of whether they are certified organic. If the local food movement abandons its organic roots, it too will be replaced with another form of sustainable/organic agriculture. Communities of the future will be sustained by relationships of integrity, many of which are established and maintained through a common interest in good food. The roots of sustainable communities are the same as the roots of sustainable organic farms. The organic worldview that will create sustainable communities as well as sustainable farms; sustainable farms will simply be an aspect of sustainable communities.

People ask me if I am optimistic about the future, and my typical answer is that I am not necessarily optimistic but I am hopeful. Hope doesn't depend on a task being quick or easy to complete or even that ultimate success is inevitable. Hope doesn't even require favorable odds of success. Hope simply means that something good is possible; that success is possible, even if not easy or very likely. Hope arises from the realization that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out and thus is worth doing. It is hope, rather than optimism, that gives people the courage to make wise choices during times of great change, to choose alternatives that make sense rather than alternatives that seem quick and easy.

The possibilities, and thus the hope, for creating sustainable farms, food systems, and communities must be viewed within the context of a nation in the midst of fundamental change. America is a nation of people searching for ways to reconnect with each other and to reconnect with the earth as a means of restoring some sense of belonging, security, and integrity to their lives while restoring social and ecological sustainability to the world in which they live.

People throughout human history have known that beyond some fairly modest level of material well-being there is no relationship between further increases in income or wealth and increases in happiness or quality of life. Once our basic material needs are met – food, clothing, shelter, health care, – the quality of our life depends far more on the quality of our relationships than on the quantity of income or wealth. We are social beings; we need to love and be loved; we need positive connections with other people. We are also moral beings. Our happiness depends on our having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. We need to feel that what we are doing is right and good. It is not a sacrifice to care for the earth for the benefit of future generations; it adds purpose and meaning to our lives.

The great transformation presents great challenges for the future but also great opportunities to create a new and better world. Communities rooted in an organic worldview of sustainability

provide opportunities for people to reconnect with each other and with the earth, and in the process, to find true and lasting happiness. In this there is hope.

End Notes

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¹⁶ Visit the *Grown Locally* website at <http://www.grownlocally.com> .

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¹⁹ Visit the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative* website at <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/> , list of other cooperatives: <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/Display.aspx?cn=otherstates> .

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