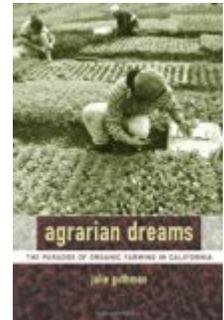


Julie Guthman. *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2004. xv + 250 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-24095-7.



Reviewed by Jeff Charles

Published on H-California (November, 2004)

When I was an undergraduate at Berkeley in the late seventies, only a few groceries sold organic products. The stores were disorderly, their floors blocked with "bulk" barrels filled with scarcely edible grains and "health" foods. I had no sense that these establishments stocked the future of American food. There seemed no doubt, on the other hand, that these places were bastions of a genuine political radicalism. Meeting announcements of feminist organizations were jammed together with "Stop Apartheid Now" stickers on the storefront window. Representatives of the Spartacist League, a Communist youth group, were often outside the door pressing fliers into shopper's hands. The idea that these organic groceries might spread beyond Berkeley's counter-cultural confines would have seemed absurd, had I been aware enough to consider it. Today, less than thirty years later, there are several successful chains like Whole Foods--a "national certified organic grocer"--committed, just as the radical Berkeley groceries were, to the "needs of the whole planet." Here it is no longer necessary to dodge dusty bins of flaxseed, quinoa, and carob chips to "buy organic." Also missing, however, is

the Spartacist League, whose members perhaps feel disinclined to dodge the luxury cars and sport utility vehicles that wheel through the parking lot.

Agrarian Dreams describes how a similar transition to the mainstream has occurred within organic farming in California. Organic practices have had, in some ways, remarkable success: California, widely known for its "factories in the fields," now has more organic farms than any other place in the country, and is a world leader in value of organic crops sold. But as Julie Guthman shows, any sense that this represents a radical transformation of California's agribusiness legacy is illusory, at best. Her book tells how and why the organic practices of the state's certified growers generally fall far short of what most people expect when they "buy organic." But, for better or worse, Guthman's study is no muckraking tract, digging up the pesticide-contaminated dirt on the organic farming movement. It is a sober, theory-driven study of the current political economy of the state's agriculture.

The book begins with a brief and cogent discussion of the various ideological forces--both

radical and conventional--that came together to foment discontent with the industrial food production system and generate hopes in the transformative power of organic farming, especially in California. As concerns grew among consumers about the safety of their food, California led the way in supplying organic products. Ideological motivation came from urban radicals returning to the land, spearheading a strong reaction against the agricultural industrialization that dominated the state. Unfortunately, Guthman argues, the very nature of this ideology undermined its ability to transform the system. The California organic movement latched onto the small family farm agrarianism represented by thinkers such as Wendell Berry. Guthman thinks that what she calls the agrarian "imaginary"--nostalgic, anti-government, individualist--resonates with some California organic growers because of their counter-cultural roots. But Guthman skewers these agrarian advocates for their combined naivete, patriarchalism, privatist conservatism, and mistaken belief that merely supporting the form of the small family farm is enough to counter the industrial processes which spawn the current system's abuses.

Having characterized the hope that organic farming will change current agricultural realities, the book proceeds to show how it has been disappointed. At the center of Guthman's analysis is a well-designed empirical study, involving a variety of census and survey data, and interviews with over 150 growers. The result is a detailed picture, as drawn by social science methodology, of California organic farming as it stood in the late 1990s. What this picture portrays is dismaying if one believes the turn to organic farming represents a chance to revive a sustainable, small farm economy that pays its workers fairly. While a number of the early growers who began in the 1970s continue to support broader organic principles, by the 1980s demand from both direct customers and processors such as tomato sauce makers brought many large scale operations into the

organic market. Meanwhile some organic growers who started out small, such as Earthbound Farms, grew so rapidly they became a buyer of other growers' crops. It was not long before the size and type of organic growers came to mirror the conventional agricultural sector in California. Small farmers are statistically dominant, but the bulk of the market is supplied by a very few large scale grower/buyer firms, with most organized as privately held corporations.

In fact the practices of these large firms, and many of the farmers they contract with, are only nominally organic, and do not come close to the organic movement's ideal of a balanced, self-sustaining agriculture, as characterized by practices such as improving the soil through the use of cover crops and mulching; adding compost and manure produced on-site, and managing pests through the encouragement of field biodiversity. Instead, these farms depend on "external inputs" such as sodium nitrate added to the soil; non-organic manure purchased from other farms, and the release of predator insects from airplanes. Many organic fruit growers use sulfur dust to control fruit rot and mildew, even though, as Guthman points out, sulfur is responsible for more worker injuries than any other farm chemical.

These departures from organic practice may be upsetting only to purists, but all advocates of agricultural reform should find it disappointing that organic growers seem to treat their largely immigrant workforce with little more consideration than conventional growers. Organic farming is naturally more labor intensive, yet Guthman finds that only a handful of growers supply steady work and a decent yearly paycheck to their workers. The rest, just as conventional farmers, employ the work gangs supplied by labor contractors. Organic farmers talk--accurately, to be sure--of how their farms expose workers to fewer toxic chemicals, but they receive exemption from the restrictions governing how much employers can require workers to perform the crippling stoop of hand

weeding. Organic growers show no sign of encouraging unionization, and in Guthman's words "maintain the air of the *patron* claiming to treat their workers as families."

In showing how organic farming has fallen short of its transformative ideals, Guthman does not, for the most part, blame the growers themselves. Rather (and this is where her theoretical predeliction enters the picture), she blames California's "agro-industrial legacy" and the structural constraints built into an agricultural system based on private ownership in land. In a key explanatory chapter, she undertakes a quick survey of California agricultural history, dividing it into different "crop regimes" each of which develop as innovative responses to periodic "crises of overproduction." In each of the four periods in which she divides the state's agricultural history, she sees "intensification" involving efforts to improve production, "appropriation" where packers, food processors, fertilizer manufacturers, and so forth begin siphoning off growers' gains, and "valorization," which for Guthman means creating profits by aiming directly at the consumer market—either by growing crops consumers desire because they are exotic or scarce, or by creating consumer desire with advertising and brand-names. Organic farming, belonging to the latest historic period dating from 1980, which Guthman designates as "value seeking," especially shows the process of "valorization" with its appeal to the concerned shopper and its growers' dependence on the extra price consumers are willing to pay for organic foods.

The processes of "intensification" and "valorization," both past and present, are reflected in land values. Land prices rise as these agricultural innovations occur and remain high, the previous profitability built permanently into their cost. Unfortunately, land prices also reflect expectations of future profits, whether it be from agriculture, or, increasingly in California, from residential or commercial development. So all California farm-

ers are trapped with land prices that are high because of previous "intensification" and are getting higher because of anticipated future development. Partly because of these land costs, more and more growers turn to organic, because of the higher prices it commands; but to keep up with costs, these organic growers are forced to pursue an industrial-type, labor-exploiting pattern inimical to sustainability.

Though I am afraid the terminology employed in these later chapters will limit the book's accessibility to a popular audience, scholars studying California will certainly find this part of the book worth reading. I must confess that I am not entirely convinced that change in the state's agricultural sector has been driven entirely by large scale agribusiness responding presciently to periodic crises of overproduction. But this could be simply because I am more comfortable with descriptive specificity than over-arching theory. I prefer a historic framework that gives at least limited place to individual achievement and failings (including those of smaller growers) that sees frameworks of gender and ethnicity as determining forces, and that tracks within the general rise of land values not just the process of constant intensification but the jerky ups and downs of speculative exuberance and deflated hopes.

My interpretative preference does not mean, however, that I dispute the paradoxical circumstances Guthman describes in the final section of the book, where she focuses on the development of state regulations certifying organic growing practices. Although regulations might have developed at first to protect farmers and consumers from false claims, they quickly narrowed the definition of organic merely to a set of technical guidelines which permitted certain "inputs" and prohibited others. To be certified required paperwork and inspections, which worked as a barrier to entry. This barrier, along with the certified label itself, helped protect the "price premium" for organic products. Meanwhile, since certification

required that land be proved free of agricultural chemicals for a period of three years, land that met this condition rose in price. To meet the increased rent or mortgage cost, growers must do even more of the intensive farming that ignores best organic practices. Thus, as certification becomes a technically-defined, marketing "brand," and as more and more farmers turn to organic products because they are high value crops, the possibility that organic farming will change the system actually shrinks.

If "buying certified organic" or "returning to the small family farm" does not offer an escape from industrialized farming, should we give up on organic farming as a reform movement? Guthman retains some hope, and offers some sensible suggestions involving more stringent regulation of conventional farming, as well as subsidies to organic farmers, and the inclusion of workers when formulating organic regulations and policies. She then ends the book affirming her faith in the same type of grand dreams that inspired the original organic movement. Farmers must reorganize cooperatively, all workers must be paid a living wage, both food and land must be "de-commodified...." Maybe community supported agriculture will provide the answer, she speculates, opening up "an economic space where social divisions can be eroded rather than accentuated."

Just as the main thrust of *Agrarian Dreams* is a useful corrective to much of agrarian sentimentalism about changing the world through tending one's own garden, so I am skeptical that a community tending their collective garden can successfully "decommodify" land. Yet food, history shows, can in fact be a powerful instrument of social change. I found this book thought-provoking in many respects, and in the end, oddly encouraging, given its message about the difficulty of escaping the oppressive aspects of California's agricultural history. Guthman, who is a professor at University of California Santa Cruz, credits the assistance of a variety of people and organizations associated

with the University of California, long the supplier of research supporting industrial agriculture. Certainly, this constitutes a shifting core of institutional thinking within the state, if not yet one affecting the heart of agribusiness. Perhaps, by furthering the discussion now taking place in the agricultural research community, Guthman's book will help reform the system in ways unanticipated by today's upscale purchasers of gourmet organic mixed baby greens.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-california>

Citation: Jeff Charles. Review of Guthman, Julie. *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. November, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10021>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.