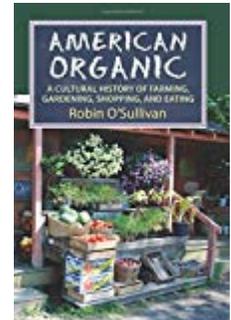


**Robin O'Sullivan.** *American Organic: A Cultural History of Farming, Gardening, Shopping, and Eating.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. 408 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2133-0.



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The production and consumption of organic food is booming. Approximately 22,000 farming operations in the United States are certified as “organic,” and the global market share of organic products has increased over 300 percent in the last two decades.[1] The popularity of organics as an agricultural method, brand, and social cause has spawned a number of academic and popular works, including Julie Guthman’s *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (2004) and Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006). In her timely work, Robin O’Sullivan seeks to historicize the often political content of this existing literature by tracing the evolution of the organics movement since the 1940s.

The core of *American Organic: A Cultural History of Farming, Gardening, Shopping, and Eating* is the deconstruction of organic ideology and discourse. The book’s six chronological chapters show how key figures represented organic agriculture to American society over time, examining each major voice or cultural influence in

turn. The first chapter introduces Jerome Irving (J. I.) Rodale, the editor of *Organic Gardening* magazine, who expounded the belief that “healthy soil—awash with organic matter—would produce healthy food, and in turn, healthy people” (p. 17). O’Sullivan relies heavily on his pre-1960s publications to illustrate the movement’s origins in the United States, but she also discusses the inspirations for Rodale’s work, such as Sir Albert Howard. The second chapter highlights the roles played by 1960s environmentalists and counter-culturalists in transforming the organic cause. The book then covers the 1970s through the 1990s, as organics became a cause célèbre among health crusaders. These decades witnessed the death of J. I. Rodale and the emergence of his son Robert at the helm of the ever-expanding Rodale Press, as well as the rise of organic food stores and co-ops. However, as the movement exploded in popularity, it faced more serious criticism from the USDA and government officials. The final chapters break with the clean chronological structure of the previous four, and thematically ex-

plore government regulation of organic products, the origins of organic food corporations, and the broadening appeal of organics to consumers.

Implicit in O'Sullivan's detailed discussions of cultural representation and meaning is the need to understand how a "movement" always on the margins managed to persist for so long. She argues that organics achieved mainstream legitimacy in recent decades by remaining flexible in its marketing and aims, absorbing precepts from a variety of related cultural phenomena: environmentalism, the homesteading and Back to the Land movements, and health food crusades. In O'Sullivan's view, however, this sometimes cacophonous collection of voices prevented the social revolution promised by early proponents. Ultimately, *American Organic* is not about discourse at all, but about the failure of organics to challenge industrial agriculture even as it has achieved success as a cultural designation. The perpetual flux of the "organic" identity and the sometimes contradictory goals of its advocates means it has never acted as a "sweeping" movement that might bring "systemic change to agriculture" (p. 266). Instead, it encourages Americans to make changes at the individual level.

O'Sullivan's source base is primarily the publications and remembrances of founding organicists, in addition to marketing material, media reports, and what she terms "organic iconography"—popular representations of the movement's principles. There is little to no archival evidence or analysis. The strength of O'Sullivan's work is the incorporation of theory from a range of disciplines, including sociology, food studies, economics, and philosophy. For instance, her explanation of how "big organics" market themselves applies theory about commodity fetishism, brand loyalty, and buying food as a communicative act. However, her focus on certain figures, such as the Rodales, limits her broader analysis. Early chapters fail to substantiate the appeal of and participation in the organic movement with quantifiable evi-

dence, often neglecting to show us the makeup of the audience or its wider influence. The same issue plagues her chapters on more recent developments, and readers might be disappointed with the lack of context regarding changing consumption patterns and demographics within the organic base. Her use of the words and actions of only a handful of figures also makes the discussion curiously male-dominated, especially considering the work of Nancy Unger on prominent women activists in the homesteading and Back to the Land movements.[2]

*American Organic* will be of interest to scholars interested in twentieth-century agrarianism, the environmental movement, and cultural representations of environmental concerns. Her careful work tracing the global and domestic network of agricultural thinkers who contributed to the cause is thorough, if unsurprising. Specialists looking for more material environmental history will not find it here, for the land itself plays no role in O'Sullivan's story. However, this kind of scholarship focusing on the intellectual influences of environmental movements is needed as American consumers increasingly demand organic and more "natural" products.

#### Notes

[1]. "Key Data," *The World of Organic Agriculture: Statistics and Emerging Trends 2015*, Research Institute of Organic Agriculture, available at <http://www.organic-world.net/yearbook/yearbook2015/pdf.html>; "Annual Count of USDA-NOP Certified Organic Operations," USDA, available at <http://apps.ams.usda.gov/Integrity/Reports/Reports.aspx>.

[2]. Nancy Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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