

Organic-industrial complex or herbal remedy? A case near Seattle and Vancouver

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ABSTRACT

Organic conversion can help maintain property and lifestyle. But organic is not always local. Based on long-term contacts this poster notes market, global and policy implications of an American family farm which converted to organic herbs with a multinational partner. Is the family's affiliation with corporate macro-actors the happy human face of globalisation? Or does it support Pollan's (2001) warning that an 'organic-industrial complex' will dominate organic movements in the US, UK and world-wide?

Keywords: dairy, markets, globalisation, organic, industrial, WTO

INTRODUCTION

In the post-BSE transition, one quality mark speaks louder than others: *organic*. But in 2001 Michael Pollan complicated debate with his *New York Times* article 'Behind the organic-industrial complex'. Irony abounds. While the USA is home to agribusiness, it is BSE/FMD-free and leads the UK in farmers markets and organic (caput) consumption. However, Britain's anti-GM protests probably influenced American practices in 2001, e.g. segregation of GM grain by most mid-west grain silos. In Britain recent reports by the Curry Commission and others urge 'reconnecting the food chain' by raising (via tax policy) sales of local/organic foods, to improve consumer health, revitalise rural UK farmers markets – and ease EU farm policy reform.

However, on what scale could local or organic farm policies endure? Pollan argues the forces of globalisation (represented by agribusiness in Codex Alimentarius) will quash local organic lifestyles, resulting in domination by 'organic-industrial' multinationals. (Horizon Organic Dairy's (USA) link with Rachel's Organic Yogurt (UK) is a prime Pollan example.) Yet Whatmore (1995) argues globalisation is an uneven process occurring not so much on the poles of the global/local binary, as in personal networks in 'the middle' – where entrepreneurial family farms persist. Where's the harm?

CASE STUDY IN WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON STATE, USA

This case study is based on long-term contacts with the Scheifer Family Farm (name changed for privacy) in northwest USA. After WW-II, the Darigold cooperative raised Whatcom County to 12th of 2563 US dairy counties, bringing farm families (many Dutch-American) to prosperity. But rationalisation cut dairy farms from 3000 (in 1950) to 235 (1999), and 1994 GATT and 1996 US Farm policies cut protection. Marginal farmers had to exit, migrate or raise value. Scheifer Farm chose organic conversion, an unusual path for Whatcom farms – but one which now appears successful.

Table 1. The conversion of a conventional dairy farm

Pre-Conversion: Scheifer conventional dairy farm	
Year	Products, Labour, Family Outlook
1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Family dairy tradition.' 90 acres pasture (100 rented). • 130 cows, several ostriches (financial loss). • Heavy debt. Prices poor. No room to expand. • No off-farm work; little social life. • Outlook: 'Poor due to environmental regulations.'

Post-Conversion: Scheifer organic herb farm	
Year	Products, Labour, Family Outlook
2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certified Organic. Just a few boarded cows on 90 acres. • Burdock, cloves, echinacea, oats, rhubarb, sage, etc. • 'Organic income 20% higher. Less work!' • Pluriactivity: Compost + wife's piano lessons = 10-25% income. • Outlook: '1997-2001 good. Bring on 2002!'

Source: Family questionnaires and interviews (Mar/Sep/Dec 2001)

DISCUSSION

After half a decade, the owners' chief concerns remain weather and labour costs. Despite a 28% minimum wage rise (for 6-to-20 seasonal workers) since 1996, they are confident for two reasons: (i) potential of equipment to save labour, and (ii) extension of the European partner's phyto-pharmaceutical exports to Mexico, Japan, etc. While Murdoch & Miele's position (recently evolved) saw farms: 'bifurcating into two main 'zones': standardized, industrialized, global networks...[and] ...localized, specialized production processes', (Murdoch & Miele, 1999) this specialised farm's market is *not* limited to its locality. And Drummond & Marsden's (1999) view that some farmers are not income-maximisers, but willing to sustain land and lifestyle via entrepreneurship and exploitation of family pluriactivity, is also supported.

To date, this ongoing study reflects Pollan's organic-industrial thesis, insofar as the farm's organic herbs are marketed globally. More research is needed on 'food miles' to assess global sourcing of farm products. Can harm to people, animals or the environment be proven in the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPMs) committee of the WTO? Evidence (e.g. greenhouse gases from transport?) might hypothetically be calculated for lower-value products like vegetables, but it seems unlikely for high-value speciality products such as organic herbs.

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