Part IV
The Interplay of Conventional and Organic

Overview and Observations

The chapters in this part discuss the interplay between conventional and organic characteristics from rather different perspectives, and highlight different issues. The first two chapters, ‘Engaging the Organic Conventionalization Debate’, by Douglas Constance et al., and ‘Organic Farmers: Contributing to the Resilience of the Food System?’ by Lesley Hunt et al. examine the organic movement and its multiple relationships with conventional agriculture. The third chapter, ‘From The Ground Up? The Principles of Australian Organic Agriculture’, by Rebecca Jones discusses the Australian history of organic from the perspective of the original principles and values of the Australian organic movement and how they have changed over time. In the fourth chapter, Brock and Barham offer an example from a religious movement in which both organic and non-organic coexist and are justified within the Amish movement and values.

Constance et al. start with an overview of conventionalization and bifurcation in organic referring to examples from different continents. The authors distinguish two models characterizing agriculture. The agrarian perspective is built on social engagement, is community oriented (civic agriculture) and entails diverse types of cooperative relationships between farmers and consumers. These relationships are based on the idea that food is from “somewhere”, and that as such, has a high transformative potential to bring farmers and citizens together. They conclude that in the US, government organic regulations have led to the exclusion of the mainly small and socially oriented farmers from the retail market. The commodity-oriented model is characterizing industrially organized agriculture designed to produce at the lowest cost for large retailer markets. This kind of diversification orients the discussion in the conventionalization debate. However, they point out that the characteristics of conventionalization differ between country, region and continent and therefore do not confirm the bifurcation thesis.

In their survey of “pragmatic conventional” organic farmers in Texas, the lack of financial support for the conversion period was found to be the main barrier to
convert to organic. Furthermore, uncertainties concerning the viability of organic production, marketing, information, and certification were also seen as constraints on moving to organic. Interestingly, these larger farms were unsatisfied with conventional farming and sympathized with the organic philosophy. The authors conclude that better governmental incentives for organic conversion would help these farmers to convert. However, it is not clear if these farmers would be attracted positively to the original idea of organic as a social movement that links farming and community.

Hunt et al. draw upon research conducted by a transdisciplinary program to compare the sustainability of organic, integrated and conventional farming systems in dairy, sheep and beef, and kiwifruit sectors of New Zealand. They illustrate that organic farmers can contribute to the resilience of the organic sector. The authors compare three management systems with a view to understand the ability of organic practices to bring resilience through diversity in production methods. In particular, they note that resilience is related to the social and cultural acceptance of ‘good farmers’ from other farmers and actors. They further discuss the future of the organic movement and ask under what conditions could there be a more resilient organic production. They observe that the more practices between organic, integrated and conventional agriculture overlap, the more organic becomes socially accepted. Hunt et al. argue that shared knowledge with farmers from other management systems increases the social acceptance of organic farmers in their rural environment. This openness allows also the diffusion of the organic model to conventional farmers. The closeness between different management systems leads to the social acceptance of organic, e.g. in kiwifruit production, and allows non-organic farmers to learn the organics environmental approach. This is less the case with dairy production because of lower organic production, and it is excluded in sheep/beef production because of significant differences in the management systems. Both systems are deeply embedded in traditions without much flexibility, and modifications in the management practices. Thus, there are few opportunities for moving toward organic. Furthermore, they note the significance of the social relationships among all kiwi-farmers that facilitates communication between organic and non-organic growers that do exit in the dairy and sheep/beef.

Hunt et al. also address the conventionalization debate. Large organic export oriented farms are often criticized as conventionalized organic farms. But in this case, they remind us that New Zealand’s agriculture is export oriented. Organic and conventional farmers are confronted with similar market conditions. Furthermore, lacking subsidies for environmentally friendly production, international markets are of high relevance for the organic farmers.

Jones examines the founding principles of organic in Australia. These include: humus rich, fertile soil; chemical free; and biodiversity and ecological wellbeing. These continue to be important for organic farmers. She acknowledges that while the modern organic movement in many countries has had to adapt standards and certification that encourage the conventionalization of ‘the organic industry,’ this process has not had a profound impact on the underlying beliefs of Australia’s organic farmers or the principles upon which their organic practices are based.
Jones concludes that the values of the Australian movement today are similar to those followed in the past, and continue to focus on ecology and health. But she also observes that organic is moving toward input based agriculture. Compared to the IFOAM Principles, the Australian movement has not specifically address the principles of fairness and care, either in their early years or today. This is consistent with many other observations in this volume.

Brock and Barham discuss the diversity among Amish farmers with respect to adopting organic practices and their understanding of a range of issues in the agrofood chain. Amish farmers justify their ethical participation in either conventional or organic agriculture in largely anthropocentric and altruistic terms based on Christian values. They describe organic practices largely in terms of stewardship and traditional techniques. But they do not see the IFOAM Principles as especially relevant for their organic practices. In contrast, many social and spiritual ideas and values, and especially in Christian doctrine, were understood to support the organic movement (Massingham 1942; Balfour 1943; Conford 1988). Christian and spiritual values continue to influence the ideas that many farmers have about their occupation (Stock 2007).

However, only a few organic farms exist within the Amish communities, and Amish values tend to be concerned more with modern, visible and mechanized agricultural practices (e.g., the tractor), the use of chemical fertilizers and hybrid seeds. Amish farmers raise animals and grow crops similar to their non-Amish neighbors who follow conventional farming practices. Amish farmers keep their interactions with public and government representatives to a minimum. In this regard, organic certification or registration requirements can be problematic. Moreover, the public differentiation created by the organic price premium represents a publicly recognized differentiation that jeopardizes the values of the community. The authors conclude that Amish religious beliefs allow individual farmers to follow different practices based on different understandings of the relationship between humans and nature.

To summarize the four contributions: organic is in a process of differentiation. The intensification of production has become dominant, but is context specific in order to consider the ecological dimension. Further, social and cultural values often risk playing a secondary role in organic practices. Constance et al. and Hunt et al. confront issues on the border of organic and conventional. In examining the organic movement and its multiple relationships with conventional agriculture, they bring in a new perspective. Instead of focusing solely on the conventionalization of organic agriculture, they consider the similarities or connections of organic with conventional practices, and how government policy has shaped these connections.

These two chapters offer different perspectives on the co-existence of conventional and organic in which farmers could work together, share information, or explore new opportunities for promoting organic as part of broader rural development strategies. In both contributions, the limited government subsidies and specific support for conversion hampers to the willingness to convert to organic as well as the relationships between organic and conventional farmers. Hunt et al. show
how the social and cultural influences of a farming style are imperative in accepting ‘good practices.’ Specifically those farming systems most similar to organic are able to accept organic as a model of “good farming”.

Jones’ chapter on the history of organic in Australia underlines health and ecological issues as dominant elements of the Australian foundation for organic. Interestingly, the social dimension appears to be less important and might explain the tendency toward conventionalization. Brock and Barham highlight social and cultural barriers in a religious movement that lead to different attitudes concerning how to farm with respect to environmental impacts. Interestingly, the Amish religious foundation allows both organic and conventional approaches. Viewed from outside this movement, it is of interest to note how, from a social, cultural and religious perspective, it bridges both management systems.

All contributions show how important it may be for understanding organic diversification, to discuss multiple farming styles, time horizons, regional, national, continental or religious influences. Social and cultural commonalities could bridge conventional and organic farming as well as within the organic movement. The IFOAM Principles could serve as an ethical platform to bring the social and cultural characteristics into the debate. But the neo-liberal dominance and governmental rules that create market conditions, influence the industrialization of the organic sector, and marginalize social and cultural dimensions, therefore should be more considered.

References