

On the challenge of unifying eco-agricultural sectors globally: some thoughts from a researcher, activist, and once-farmer in the so-called United States, September 2020 ¹

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The challenge is set. How to scale-up forms of agriculture which support human and nonhuman life, in a time of cascading multiple crises? This challenge is not new, nor is one of its main barriers: a diversity of approaches to this challenge – with different underlying ideologies and belief systems – often contradict each other, struggling against one another in attempts to affect government and corporate policy. These tensions have often played out in issues of market standards, with some advocating for Organic certification, given its long history and position as the only state-regulated standard for non-harmful, ecological food production. Others have advocated for systems such as regenerative agriculture, agroecology, permaculture, biodynamic, Zero Budget Natural Farming, and so on. In the United States context (where I am from), the Organic sector is itself divided, in a bifurcated market involving values-driven small farmers attempting to survive via various forms of direct marketing, and larger-scale, input-substituting farms serving larger-scale institutional markets (as research has shown, the latter are often owned by players involved simultaneously in so-called “conventional” production).

A major issue has been integrating into certification standards the social elements implied in Organic agriculture and envisioned by its original social movement proponents. Positively, the vision laid out by IFOAM in its “[Organic 3.0](#)” framework shows that many Organic-focused groups have not lost their social aspirations, even if the industry itself has indisputably ‘conventionalized’. Sadly, but worthy of repeated sober reminder, academic research has suggested that such social elements (e.g. farmworker safety and remuneration, democratic decision-making, local economic prioritization, gender equality) are near impossible to regulate through state-policy-codified standards. Research has further shown that the act of creating eco-ag standards around a marketing category (as in “Organic”) is bound to lead to contradictions, and to the incorporation of ‘alternative’ certified markets into capitalist circuits of investment and production, such that the alternative *non-capitalist* values of organic producers, individually and as a social whole, are undermined in the process.

I would suggest that this “social pillar” of Organic can only be fought for by food producers and consumers who are self-described, self-identified, and self-organized *as social movements* rather than *as market entities*; that is, within a political-economy of capitalist land ownership and labor relations, social goals cannot be reliably regulated through market demands and policy changes.

Land is the basis for *every one* of our alternative visions, yet there are real political differences about how to achieve access to land for (new) ecological producers. Referring to the United States context, but recognizing that unequal and post-colonial land access patterns are found throughout the globe, these differences are largely dichotomous: between those who essentially are benefited by the existing land ownership set-up and those who are disempowered by it. In the USA, the beneficiaries are mostly descendants of colonizers, with

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97% of agricultural land being held today by whites. This group includes many proponents of ‘regenerative’ agriculture in the USA – often well-meaning farmers from multi-generational farm families who are seeking to transition away from harmful extractive farming practices – who do not seek to upend land markets or ‘the market’ (in general) as means to ‘succeed’ in agriculture-as-business. Conveniently for this sector, land ownership is itself a means towards economic privilege, somewhat divorced from the actual act of farming on that land (often, due to benefits from tax and subsidy laws).

The disempowered group of current or would-be protagonists of an expanded eco-ag sector includes:

- Indigenous people dispossessed of land over generations of violent trauma and attempted erasure, who nonetheless are working to revitalize indigenous foodways and production practices;
- Black people descended from the enslaved forced to work the land but also prevented for centuries (by force) from gaining ground through land tenure, who nonetheless have kept a Black agrarian tradition alive, often via urban farming;
- People of color more broadly (including many migrant and migrant-descended communities), subjected to various forms of discrimination; this group includes many Latino farmworkers who would jump at the chance to manage their own farms;
- The working poor who find it near impossible to amass enough capital to enter into agriculture;
- Young aspiring farmers coming of age during economic crisis and pandemic-limited possibilities, many of whom come from the above groups and do not have access to inherited land resources.

The differences between these groups and the dominant landowner class cannot be wished away through a well-meaning desire to unify ‘alternatives’ to industrial agriculture; they must be addressed directly by and within those movements of alternatives. Difficult conversations about entrenched inequalities, active projects of reparations, truth-telling and reconciliation, and solidarity at levels from the individual to the global, are all crucial means to the goal of political unity.

This takes us to the issue of how to gain ground towards that unity at the global level. The framework of “food sovereignty” developed by La Vía Campesina has already achieved some level of this convergence in international dynamics, but still, most eco-agricultural sectors in the Global North are latecomers to this concept and its mobilization. We need white, landowning, eco-agricultural producers to vocally and actively join in the defense of the rights of the global peasantry to land and their continuity of culture and production. Oppositional politics is as necessary to this as the ‘solutionary’ focus of most eco-agriculture proponents. In this case, there is a great need for those with market power, capital, and credibility in spheres of mainstream government (particularly, Organic-focused businesses based in the North) to oppose US lobbying on behalf of agribusiness, and more specifically to be organizing in opposition to the international grain, meat, and pesticide complexes.

There is work to be done in simultaneously empowering smaller producers domestically, while working with and supporting global allies. An example of this is recent efforts of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance to act in concert with the African Food Sovereignty Alliance to oppose statements made by the US Ambassador to the FAO in opposition to agroecology. Participation in global fora is a key activity for this political work, like the forthcoming UN Food Systems Symposium, and ongoing meetings of the Committee on World Food Security, and the Convention on Biological Diversity. The fact is, grassroots level eco-ag actors (especially those from more marginalized backgrounds) are hard-pressed to find the time and money to attend these fora, the way that NGOs, research institutes, and larger market actors can. From my experience, some of the

more well-funded international eco-ag efforts (e.g. in the regenerative agriculture space) are not doing the patient and humble work of partnering with grassroots actors to bring these voices, critiques, and perspectives into the halls of power. Instead there are attempts to incorporate other social movements into *their own* label, organization, or strategy. This isn't collaboration, it is merely another form of colonization.

In addition, political organizing, network building, and advocacy need not be limited to the international level, and can involve practical work in diverse spaces. For instance, those of us involved in research can stop expecting more “proof” of eco-ag’s ecological or productive or health credentials to lead to transformative change, and should begin incorporating social dimensions into transdisciplinary kinds of investigation that are created in dialogue with movements, farmers, workers and other actors in struggle. Researchers can also organize themselves into politically active formations, as with the North America-focused [Agroecology Research-Action Collective](#). The transdisciplinary approach to research should also apply to political strategy, as greater collaboration and “articulation” between eco-ag and other social movements (e.g. migration, housing, democracy, and racial justice) benefits our long-term success. This is best done through processes that link movements from the bottom up and make the conceptual connections between these movements clearer and more compelling, while building actionable goals – especially outside of ‘policy’.

Why outside of policy? Well, we might consider here the recent rise in attention to issues of indigenous sovereignty globally, and the apparent connection of legacies of colonization to continued environmental degradation. From this, some have suggested we may need a “Decolonial” Organics vision, or an “Organic 4.0”, in order to advance and unite multiple sectors of eco-agriculture. It’s not likely that such a vision could be regulated by national states, which for the most part are themselves of colonial origin, and are built on colonial modes of law, thought, and cosmology. But such a vision could emerge from *relations* developed among producers, associated movements and NGOs, indigenous peoples and their nations, global and international self-organized institutions, and so on.

In sum, in seeking unity among diverse proponents of eco-ag, we should think in terms not of ‘policy’ – which gets us caught up in non-transformational processes of compromise, greenwashing, and co-optation – but of common platforms and processes to converge and align. Where are our opportunities to *meaningfully* (not symbolically) act in solidarity with others less fortunate than ourselves? It is via these opportunities that we connect and build power (in *and outside* of food systems themselves) that will allow us to obstruct and oppose agribusiness expansion now, undercut its ongoing attempts to co-opt alternatives, and lay the groundwork for future possibilities of transformative policy – underpinned as it will be by a truly diverse social basis in eco-ag’s diverse proponents, protagonists, and perspectives.