

Ontario's Organic Sector: Politics in Place or Conventionalization?

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Disturbing the trend of an increasingly industrialized agriculture, organic movements began throughout North America and Europe as alternatives to the dominant food system. Recently however, some scholars suggest that the boundary that divides alternative food markets from mainstream ones has blurred, and that the market-based logic of organic food systems, with the associated standards and premium pricing, has turned these former alternatives into extensions of neoliberal markets. In other words, the sector has been conventionalized (Guthman, 2009; Luetchford & Pratt, 2011). Others, however, argue that alternative economies maintain their “alternativeness” by building networks and more deliberative and grassroots forms of governance that are more resistant to mainstreaming (see Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman, 2012 for a recent synthesis). These scholars argue that the problem is not the weakening of standards, but the weakening of governance. Hence privileging civic processes or ‘politics in place’ can demonstrate new possibilities in the alternative food movement (Little, Maye, Ilbery, 2010). Using data collected as part of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs New Directions program, this paper explores the construction of alternative organic food networks in Ontario. Drawing on interviews with 80 ecological and organic producers, handlers, and retailers in eight regions of the province, the paper explores the question of ‘politics in place’ versus conventionalization of the organic sector.

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