

Modern production and organic farming

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Introduction

I first got interested in organic farming when I met my friend's parents who called themselves organic farmers though they were not registered to be such. They supported the idea of cultivating with as little fertilizers and pesticides as possible but were not willing to tie themselves not to use chemicals if in some case they considered a bit of them was best for their farm. Since then I have been trying to form an opinion whether strict choice of following the organic farming regulations is the best kind of farming.

I find the attitude that organic farming is very natural somehow irritating. Agriculture is never really natural. It is always about changing the natural ecosystem dramatically by taking out yield and trying to bring something back. Some species are violently preferred over the others. And what I understand is that some of the organic farmers use methods of getting rid of pests which might not be good for the ecosystems either.

Agriculture is always production. However, in some cases it can produce only landscape or species conservation and employment or food security – for instance when fallowing. So how I think it is that in agriculture conservation is something that is produced because agriculture goods do not grow naturally. In forestry what is conserved is usually what is left to grow naturally but neither agricultural species nor even soil is surviving without human interference. Letting the soil rest by not cultivating it for a while can be important indeed, but if the area is left for nature to take care of it for a long time, the field has to be remade.

In this essay I aim to go through the main thoughts I have learnt and want to learn about organic farming. I have attended the basic course on organic production and discussed about on some Environment Policy lectures. I am interested in placing organic farming into the big picture of agriculture and ecomodernisation.

The benefits of organic farming

Organic farming is conservation in the sense that more weeds and insects are usually let to live within and in the near surroundings of the field ecosystem because pesticides do not disturb them. I would be interested to know more about in what kind of ecosystems it is really the best even for the yield that the agricultural biodiversity is higher. Is it of relevance in Finland or elsewhere in Europe and how important can it be in warmer countries?

Eutrophication of water systems is one of the most serious effects of modern agriculture. I would be interested to know more about what kind of improvement is organic farming able to bring into this matter. It is important that the plants get all the nutrients they need – that way they are able to efficiently take the nutrients available and they will not end up in the water systems. Are the plants able to get a balanced input from organic farming? Could there in some cases be worse run off?

Seuri (1999) emphasizes that it is a great challenge to agriculture that animal and plant production is becoming more separated to certain areas. Organic production could ease down the change because dung is an important fertilizer when artificials cannot be used. However, there are many, especially among the just for the sake of subsidies –type of farmers, who do not use dung at all and are satisfied with a minor yield and perhaps impoverishing the soil.

Other areas of sustainable agriculture - traditional species and energy production

Also emphasizing the conservation of traditional agriculture landscape species I find somehow annoying. Of course on the other hand we need no new extinct species on the globe. But on the other, people created the agricultural areas that came to support also the ecological lockers of many traditional flowering plants. Today mostly underdrains, pesticides and fewer pastures have cut down the number of species that agricultural areas support. If some people are happy to mow some of the areas that used to be pastures, or even better, find it worth it to still have the areas pastured, it is great. Otherwise, we will just have to expect that times change.

For me perhaps the most interesting issue is the total sustainability of agriculture: How to diminish the energy consumption in agriculture? Could agriculture be self-sustaining in energy or even a net producer? There are options like producing oil or ethanol from plants, natural gas from dung or plants that can be burnt. The globe is likely to phase energy crisis as the fossil fuels are

finishing or climate crisis because of fossil fuel consumption. In this situation it seems silly for agriculture to rely on, for instance, nitrogen fertilizers which need massive amounts of energy to be produced.

It is important that, as in all fields, also in agriculture the prices of products are calculated with best possible methods of environmental economics to include the harm that is done the environment. In Finland the prices of fertilizers raised considerably during the 1990s but are they still “high enough”? This has a lot to do with the competitiveness of organic farming.

Genetic modification and organic production

Genetic modification in organic production has been disapproved by the European Union. This is an issue that might become very significant in the future if – for economic reasons – there will only be two sorts of production chains: gm-free organic products and other products whose gm-ingredients might be unknown. Currently most EU-citizens are not willing to use gm-products.

The regulations that protect the rights of the farmers when considering the issues of gm-contamination are largely poorly planned. For example, in Canada it is no longer possible to produce organic rape seed oil because the whole country is contaminated by gm-rapes pollen. (www.irish-organic.com/why/index.html)

Organic farming in Europe

When meeting organic agriculture students from other countries I am looking forward to hear as what kind of a solution organic farming is thought of by them and their countries scientists and consumers? Is it just a new marketing gimmick, do people think it has an important effect on the ecosystems, is it more often considered as scientifically researched method or a way of production by a certain hippie movement? How is organic farming subsidized? What kind of arguments used abroad could lighten up the public conversation in Finland?

Especially interesting I find what kind of reputation does organic farming have in European post-socialist countries. First of all I would like to know more about how were their agricultural policies like in the past, how did the past policies affect the present ones and are they now? Are there some special features in the agricultural ecosystems due to the policies? I would be interested to get also working experience in one of the Eastern European countries in future.

Conclusions

Organic agriculture sounds like a wonderful solution to make agriculture sustainable. However, there are still many questions to be answered and limited research funds to be used. In Finland research on

organic farming has largely concentrated on economical viewpoints or to look at organic farming as a movement. In natural science there would be a lot of research to be done.

Kumpulainen (1995) defines organic farming as one of the three strategies in the forming of the future of agriculture. The other strategies are sustainable, balance-seeking strategy and breaking away from nature. It is obvious that all three will remain for a long time but how big areas will organic farming take over? What kind of research, marketing and popularity level will it reach?

I am very interested in what does organic research have to give to regular farming. It is important that large areas will be cultivated more ecologically. Large amount of farms will not swap into organic farming straight but if good methods are found there, they can become more popular. And in some areas pure organic farming can make a difference towards better.

References

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