

Book Review

Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California. Julie Guthman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 250 pp.

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Walter Benjamin heads his text 'On the Theory of Knowledge; Theory of Progress' with a citation from Marx. "The reformation of consciousness lies *solely* in . . . the awakening of the world from its dream about itself." [Marx's emphasis]

For Freud wishes dream. Guthman examines the California dreaming of 'the organic farm'. Its manifest wish she ascribes to the agrarian populism of the 'new-left'. The young (and middle aged) radicals of the 1960s and 70s replaced class politics with personal morality. The search for an alternative lifestyle led back - to the land. The journey was to be more than spatial. In the new age individuals would live with, rather than on, the land. Organic farming was the natural medium of this visionary relationship. Communal organisation of new age farming proved contradictory; its management impossible. In the end, the radical dream-wish is of a self-sufficient family farm disposing of a modest surplus (to meet the exigencies of co-existence with non-organic society).

This image of agriculture is new to California. "Let me repeat: *California never had an agrarian tradition*" (p. 174, original emphasis). From its origins in the 19th Century gold rush, California agriculture has long been crop intensive, reliant on cheap (racialised) labour and predisposed to capital consolidation at the level of production and/or distribution. Progressive market forces are deeply embedded in California soil. These forces are embodied in land value(s). The continual re-evaluation of land at its most profitable (agricultural or urban) opportunity, defines a level of (commercial) sustainability irrespective of personal wish. In this competitive context - 'where the devil drives, needs must' - California agriculture has, since its inception, been swept by waves of intensification (more product) and innovation (higher value product substitution).

In this context Guthman examines, in detail, the intersection of organic and conventional farming. She traces a growing niche market for high value organic food and the increasing consolidation of its production and marketing. A few large producers have emerged from the organic sector itself. Most big producers are, however, conventional growers attracted by high(er) value opportunity. At the other pole of organic production are the part-timers. Most are land speculators maximising tax benefits and/or lifestyle residents with urban incomes. The true dreamer, employing little or no wage labour, on a small working farm, striving to improve organic practice, is the exception.

The contradictions between the different forms of organic production are reflected in the history of its codification. In the beginning organic farmers organised to develop and spread practices of working with the living land. Over time emphasis shifted to protecting the commercial value of the organics brand by licensing compliant producers. Finally, as the locus of regulation progressed from private organisation(s) to State and then Federal legislation, the nexus of codification regressed, as it were, to narrow definitional debate over the *meaning* of 'organic farming' (i.e., from action to representation). The initial program articulated by organic farmers was of: "an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based

on minimum use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony” (p. 117 - California Certified Organic Farmers). In the end, however, it was the Federal Government that defined organic production - as: “a production system managed in accordance with the Act and regulations ...” (p. 118). For Guthman “the act itself simply proscribes the use of synthetic chemicals ... (with certain exceptions) ...” (ibid). Organic production came to be defined not by the positive virtues of process but by the mere absence of known noxious inputs. Whatever else the effects of this regression, beyond dispute it makes the production of organic food cheaper.

Guthman's elaboration of organic farming in California is densely ramified – defying tidy summation. Nevertheless, against one suspects her sympathies, she is forced to conclude “an unexpected complementarity between organic regulation and industrial agriculture” (p. 175); that “the 2002 implementation of the new federal rule for organic production [] generated a palpable sense of loss within the organic farming movement” (p. 174). At the turn of the millennium organic farming had become the latest wave in the Californian history of higher value agricultural production. Like citrus, kiwifruit, strawberries and the others before it, organic farming had ripened into an opportunity for corporate capitalism.

One activist protested: “This isn’t what we meant” (p. 172). Up and down the State true believers called for a recommitment to the original dream. Guthman has her doubts. She suspects a less savoury, (latent) desire in the wish of organic farming. She finds “the small-scale family farm ideal ... while highly critical of mainstream agriculture ... is equally bound up with a sort of cultural conservatism...” (p.174). She links “small-scale property with family values and tradition” and charges the agrarian dream with “failing to question [] race and gender relations”; “unproblematic patriarchal exploitation of women’s and children’s labor”; and “ultimately uphold[ing] white privilege by ignoring the racial history of U.S. land policy”. (ibid)

The fading of a revolutionary dream famously provoked Lenin to write: ‘What *is* to be done’. Guthman wonders: “What can be done?” Caught between her suspicion of both actually existing organic farming and the latent desire of dreamers, yet “not willing to write off the transformative potential of organic – or, better said, alternative – agriculture” (p. 179) she proposes more technical support, stronger regulation, selected subsidies. She concludes with the question: “Wither social justice?” Guthman’s analysis of the (increasingly corporate) practice and (secretly reactionary) dream of organic farming is disturbing. Her conclusion, however, soothes social sleep. The ills are painful, requiring treatment, but not yet fatal. Yet, between the lines of her analysis may be read, beyond all individual intention and personal alternative, a structural alliance between large capital organisation and petty bourgeois ideology. This structural convergence is widely manifest in the contemporary world and in the 1930s had radical dreams for a new Germany.