1. Introduction

In 2012, the global market for organic products was worth over $63.8 billion (USD), quadrupling its value from 1999 ($15.2 billion) (Willer and Lernoud, 2014:23). The United States (US) and to a lesser extent Canada have been the fastest growing markets for organic foods in the world. Between 2005 and 2010, the size of the market for organic products in both Canada and the US more than doubled (Haumann, 2014:242). In 2012, sales of organic food in the US were worth over $27 billion (USD) with over 40 million people purchasing some type of organic food in that year. According to a study quoted by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), this figure has more than doubled from less than a decade ago (Osteen et al., 2012). To the north, Canada’s comparatively smaller market topped $3.5 billion (CAD) in sales in 2012 (Holmes and Macey, 2014:249).

Organic food can be found everywhere from the local farmer’s market to the aisles of Walmart across Canada and the US as consumer demand continues to rise. In the minds of some, the word organic conjures up images of clean, green and healthy food and is considered superior to conventional fare. Despite the 2008 global recession’s reverberating effects on rates of unemployment and on food and fuel prices, organic food sales continue to grow as concerns over environmental toxins in the food system, ‘frankenfoods’ and worries about obesity, health and nutrition increase among the general population (Lernoud et al., 2014:251). To match growing demand, the land devoted to organic agriculture continues to rise across North America (Figure 1.1). Though land conversions slowed in the post-recession period, 2012 marks a noticeable increase from a decade ago.

Globally, the number of organic producers sat at 1.9 million in 2012 (Willer and Lernoud, 2014:23). Counted among them are an increasing number of Canadian and American producers. Based on census data from both countries, Figure 1.2 clearly shows that more individuals are participating in producing organic fruits, vegetables, grains, livestock and dairy products than ever before.

The current trend of market expansion and surging consumer demand is a far different reality from the one predicted for organic food in the
The changing politics of organic food in North America

**Figure 1.1** Organic agricultural land in North America (in thousands of hectares) by year


**Figure 1.2** Total number of certified organic producers by year

1970s. Many government officials, scientists and media outlets believed that organic agriculture was inefficient, fraudulent and sometimes even dangerous to human health. Fears were voiced about what the expansion of organic agriculture could mean for the security of US food supply. As US Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz argued in 1973, ‘before we go back to organic agriculture in this country, somebody must decide which 50 million Americans we are going to let starve or go hungry’ (quoted in Belasco, 1989:119). The American Association for Advancement of Science echoed Butz’s concerns while debating the social implications of the ‘organic food myth’ at their 1974 annual meeting. Speakers discussed how ‘food faddists, eccentrics and pseudoscientists were frightening the public into purchasing higher priced organic food by claiming organic foods were more nutritious, when there was no scientific evidence behind these claims’ (Washington Post, 1974:F2). These fears and concerns have not materialized and instead, more and more Americans and Canadians are purchasing organic foods because organic foods are understood to embody qualities that food produced in a conventional manner does not.

Despite the remarkable success of the organic sector in recent decades it has been accompanied by increasing confusion over what certified organic actually means, and diverse values are associated with the idea of organic. For example, a survey conducted in 2010 of Canadian purchasers of organic foods revealed that while consumers understand the broader environmental issues related to organic agriculture, 34 percent of those surveyed believed organic food was better tasting and more nutritious than conventionally produced foods, while one-third of consumers believed organic agriculture uses no pesticides in production whatsoever (Campbell, Mhlanga and Lesschaeve, 2013:537).\(^1\) A more recent study conducted in 2014 by US-based brand consultant BFG revealed that while 70 percent of those surveyed purchased organic foods, only 20 percent could define what the word ‘organic’ appearing on a food label actually meant. In explaining the results, the CEO of BFG said ‘consumers are ultimately idealists… They want to believe. They trust the label and they’re willing to pay more … for something … even though they are not totally sure what it means’ (Brownstone, 2014).

The definitions of organic found in the standards and guidelines of governmental agencies, certifiers, industry associations and non-governmental organizations are much more complex and diverse than the

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\(^1\) The regulations for organic production practices allow for the application of some pesticides and other preventative measures like antibiotics if an animal becomes ill, but there are strict requirements about what types can be used (see CAN/CGSB-32.331-2006; AMS-NOP-13-0011).
generally held public views expressed in consumer surveys. The guidelines of some certifiers can address the treatment and welfare of animals, the size and scale of farming establishments as well as labor standards covering agricultural workers. The confusion over the meaning of organic by those who buy organic foods but are not overly familiar with the intricacies of production guidelines stems from the longstanding ambiguity over a clear link between the principles and values commonly associated with organic agriculture and the actual practices that are involved in producing organic food according to formalized standards. What the word ‘organic’ actually refers to on a food label that is monitored and regulated by governmental agencies may be quite different from the values and principles consumers associate with the organic movement and organic food in general.

Though consumers today primarily purchase organic because it is perceived as a healthier, more nutritious and environmentally conscious option compared to conventional foods, consumer perspectives may not necessarily reflect the realities of organic production methods, or the nutritional qualities of organic foods. The ongoing debates about what defines organic agriculture by organic practitioners, businesses, government, consumers, academics and activists have their roots in an almost century-long evolution of the organic movement and the market for organic foods. What and who defines organic, and how various understandings influence the politics of organic food, have been important factors in shaping the development of the organic sector in North America. The current situation must be understood in relation to the series of reactions by the organic community to the interconnected social, economic and political changes in the broader food system. The result is a historically ambiguous position taken by the organic community towards defining a clear and coherent position on which social and economic relationships and processes are acceptable in organic agriculture practices and which are not. Today ‘organic’ is a highly contested concept such that its very meaning continues to spark social and political debates among those who are concerned about food quality, safety, nutrition and ecological sustainability.

THE ROOTS OF ORGANIC

From its early beginnings, organic agriculture has defined itself in relation to the structures and practices of industrial agriculture (often referred to as ‘conventional’ agriculture). In many ways the principles associated with organic agriculture emerged in response to the structures
Introduction

and practices of the conventional food system. Despite the many benefits attributed to industrialized food production, including a more stable food supply and lower food prices, concern over the environmental implications of the use of synthetic chemicals for food production, including depleted soil fertility, nutrient run-off and water system pollution from farm waste, were motivating factors for early organic practitioners to experiment with agricultural techniques (Rodale, 2010). The desire to maintain soil health in food production remains the central principle of the organic approach, finding its way into formal and informal organic production standards and regulations around the world. Organic food is often associated with a more environmentally friendly form of food production because organic agriculture rejects many fossil fuel intensive agricultural technologies used in conventional production that are proven to cause environmental damage. This association has contributed to growth in markets for organic foods and has also been an important link of principles between the organic and environmental social movements in the 1960s.

Industrializing processes also had tremendous impacts on the socio-economic organization of agricultural production in North America and informed the development of the organic sector. With the increasing technological intensity of production methods and rising demand for higher farm outputs at lower costs, the post-war period saw a major shift in how the agricultural sector was organized. Many of the family farms in North America faced difficulties maintaining competitiveness as international commodities prices fluctuated and pressures to reduce costs increased (Bonanno et al., 1994; Kloppenburg (ed.), 1988; Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson, 1987; Dahlberg, 1979). Some early organic practitioners viewed the social and economic changes resulting from increased use of industrial agricultural technologies as evidence of the growing control of agribusiness in the food system and the expansion of unsustainable farming practices. The socio-economic critiques of industrialized food production, and the desire to remain independent from reliance on agribusiness, motivated many practitioners to experiment with on-farm waste recycling techniques and non-chemical pest management strategies. These practices served as an ideational foundation for early definitions of organic agriculture and were important components to the growth and expansion of the organic movement and organic agriculture across North America throughout the twentieth century (Peters, 1979; MacRae, 1990; Reed, 2010).

Consumer awareness of the human and environmental health and safety hazards associated with industrial agriculture, that plays such an important role in today’s market expansion for organic foods, has its
roots in the new social movements of the 1960s. Publicized instances of compromises to food safety and environmental damage attributed to the over-use of synthetic pesticides and industrial processes (such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962)) caused growing concern about the health and safety implications of conventional agriculture. This continued with well-publicized food contaminations and safety hazards like the Alar apple controversy in the 1980s, the BSE crisis in Europe in the 1990s, the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the UK in the 2000s, as well as food recalls ranging from ground beef to bagged spinach in the US (Lang, 2004; Nestle, 2004). Increasing public awareness of health and safety issues related to food in Canada and the US helped to put pressure on both government and businesses involved in the agri-food system to be more accountable and proactive when hazards were identified, resulting in the creation and expansion of food safety inspections, testing and monitoring by government agencies. Despite ongoing efforts to reduce food safety risks throughout the food system, challenges continue. In 2007, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 30 percent of the population in industrialized countries suffers from food-borne illnesses every year, while 76 million cases of food-borne illness were reported annually in the US (WHO, 2007). More recently, the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that there are 48 million cases, 128 000 hospitalizations and 3000 deaths related to food-borne illnesses in the US every year (CDC, 2013). Consumer fears surrounding food safety have helped expand the market for organic foods that are promoted as safer and healthier than conventionally produced food (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2003; Macey, 2007).

Prior to the 1990s, networks of small-scale organic producers and businesses served a relatively small consumer base in Canada and the US. In the 1970s, there were fewer than 4000 health food stores, the primary sales point for organics at the time, in both Canada and the US (Myers, 1976; Cooper, 2006). But concerns over the environmental and human costs of industrialized agriculture, the use of biotechnology in the food system (dubbed as ‘unnatural’, tools of agribusiness and threats to biodiversity), and food safety fears fueled the explosive consumer demand for organic products across North America in the 1990s.

The rapid rise in demand triggered significant changes in the structure of the organic sector. The two most notable and impactful are the involvement of what were traditionally viewed as ‘conventional corporate interests’ and the creation of formalized regulations for ‘certified’ organic production processes. Conventional corporate interests met rapid consumer demand with a flurry of investment, resulting in many corporate mergers, acquisitions and the introduction of new brands of organic food.
products. Market expansion also necessitated the need for more formalized regulations and standards to monitor and evaluate organic agricultural processes and foods transported across North America, and thus regulatory frameworks were developed in both the US and Canada throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. The rules governing activities in the organic sector became part of the broader regulatory frameworks for food and agriculture originally designed for conventional means of production. This further distanced some of the more substantive elements of the organic principles from organic practices because of the overarching principles and mandates informing agriculture and food policy (increasing crop yields, international market expansion, trade-related product equivalence regulations, etc.).

The rush to capitalize on growing consumer demand through investment by conventional agri-food corporations like Coca-Cola and General Mills caused heated debates among members of the organic community regarding how this happened and what it meant for the future of organic food as an alternative to conventional foods. In the early 2000s, Julie Guthman (2004:10) observed that:

> the organic food sector is increasingly bifurcated into two very different systems of provision: one producing lower cost and/or processed organic food … the other producing higher value produce in direct markets and appealing to meanings of organicism, political change and novelty … Practitioners in both systems are able to claim the moral high ground.

The lack of a firm commitment to a particular political platform with consistent goals of socio-economic change (or at least an alternative to market relations in the conventional food system) has meant that the meaning of organic has been continually reinterpreted in relation to broader changes in the conventional food system. It has also meant that diverse approaches can co-exist within the organic sector that do not necessarily adhere to any social or political principles historically associated with the organic movement.

The implications of formalizing into public policy the way organic food is produced, regulated and monitored for the integrity of organic principles and the organic movement have been explored from myriad academic perspectives. Some discussions focus on the evaluation of innovations in organic agriculture in terms of organization and economic productivity, detailing techniques, methods and implications for outputs (Cacek and Langner, 1986; Lampkin and Padel (eds), 1994; Bellon and Penvern (eds), 2014). Country and farm level analyses have provided
important insights into the changes experienced by producers and consumers as increased demand puts pressure on maximizing outputs. There is also ongoing interest in the dynamics of the regulatory environment for organic foods, inspection and certification systems that explore how organic standards are developed, how they relate to other forms of food regulation and how they are evolving, including an entire volume of the journal *Food Policy* (42) in 2013 (Riddle and Coody, 2003; Bostrom and Klintman, 2006; Mutersbaugh, 2005; Padel, 2009; Daugbjerg, 2012). Others focus on the dynamics of consumption, consumer-led food movements and the socio-political implications of expanding organic markets (Lohr, 1998; Allen and Kovach, 2000; Murdoch and Miele, 1999; Klonsky, 2000; Buck et al., 1997; Raynolds, 2004; Howard, 2009b; Johnson and Szabo, 2011). How consumption habits and organic agricultural production practices influence the shape of the organic sector and whether these changes have moved the organic model towards resembling those found in the industrialized food system has occupied a significant space in academic discussions (Clunies-Ross, 1990; Guthman, 2004; Hall and Mogyorody, 2001; DeLind, 2000; Campbell and Rosin, 2011).

The dichotomized ‘conventionalization versus differentiation’ debate has begun to soften somewhat to account for the diversity of styles and approaches to organic production. These frequently deviate from a purely principled understanding of organic on the one hand, to a corporatized, factory farm model of agricultural practices on the other. Instead, current discussions increasingly focus on the nuances of organic production, consumption, activism and regulation in relation to the social and political dynamics of the broader food system to demonstrate how organic continues to differentiate itself from conventional production as well as diversities within organic sectors (Conford, 2001; Reed, 2010). Though in some academic circles the debate over whether organic has ‘sold out’ to corporate interests in North America is old news, other discussions continue to chronicle and attempt to understand the evolving regulatory system and changing consumer demands for organic foods in attempts to preserve a degree of ‘organic integrity’ (Hoodes et al., 2010). The perception that all organic food is, by definition, more nutritious and more ethically sound because it does not contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and chemical-inputs continues to flourish in North America. For this reason, the relationship between the principles and practices in the organic food sector, and their relationship to the conventional food system, remains timely and relevant.
THE POLITICS OF ORGANIC: INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND CHANGE

This book examines how the evolving organic movement cultivated a set of principles that have been continuously reinterpreted and redefined by practitioners, businesses, policy-makers, advocates and consumers in North America. It focuses on the relationship between the organic movements in Canada and the US, the economic connections between organic markets on both sides of the border and how both countries’ organic food regulations relate to one another. In many contemporary studies of organic food it is often the American and European cases that are used for comparison because of similarities in the size of their markets for organic products and their mutual importance as major trading partners in food products (Bostrom and Klintman, 2006; Klintman and Bostrom, 2013). The politics of organic food in Canada has received much less scholarly attention despite the presence of the early organic movement in the 1950s and the involvement of US agri-food corporations in the Canadian food sector. Canada is also a major exporter of organic food products to both the US and Europe, while it imports a significant proportion of organic food sold domestically from the US. In 2008, it was estimated that Canada imported 74 percent of all retail organic products from the US (ACNeilson Canada, 2009), indicating a close and significant relationship between each country’s organic sectors.

Unlike many other scholarly examinations of organic agriculture, this book does not debate the nutrition and health claims attributed to organic foods or the agronomic aspects of organic agriculture. Instead, it focuses on the politics of organic agriculture and how the organic movement emerged to challenge the socio-economic relationships found in conventional agriculture over time. It examines how the principles of organic and the increasing presence of organic food in mainstream markets in the 1970s and 1980s paved the way for the dramatic market expansion and conventional corporate involvement in the business of organic foods in the 1990s. The book explores how the development of an alternative food movement that prided itself on its diverse membership and independence from government and agribusiness was influenced by many practices and behaviors found in industrial agricultural sectors. The case of how the organic movement changed in response to growing mainstream popularity of organic food can shed some light on how alternative social movements change and evolve in relation to broader societal changes and how processes of institutionalization create pressures for altering the movement’s goals (see Fridell, 2007).
North America shows that attempts to achieve socio-economic change through conventional market mechanisms increases a social movement’s susceptibility to the involvement of outside actors who want to profit from the association of a purchasable good with the values and principles consumers associate with the movement. It also provides a better understanding of current and emergent food movements and how they can attempt to meet their goals within the current globalized food system.

This book explores the changing politics of organic food by examining the processes of institutionalization to uncover why certain principles and practices associated with organic were included in conventional policy frameworks, corporate business strategies and the objectives of social activism, and why others were not. It discusses how vocal members (both individual and organizations) associated with the organic movement responded to the growing markets for organic foods and the institutionalization of organic agriculture into pre-existing regulatory frameworks covering agricultural practices and food labeling and safety. Institutionalization is a process of formalizing principles, practices and normative behaviors as public rules, standards and decision-making structures to improve the predictability of behaviors among stakeholders within a particular system (North, 1990). Institutionalization is a way to explain how and why rules, structures and institutions themselves are created, maintained and modified by evaluating relationships and processes within a given system. It is a useful way to explore the politics of organic food from a twenty-first century perspective because it not only considers how and why the behaviors of stakeholders and institutions change, but it also attends to changing relationships between the constellation of stakeholders, institutions and the ideas they promote to help explain outcomes. It also provides a way of understanding why some substantive principles guiding production that address the negative social, political and ecological outcomes of industrialized agriculture were not included in standards and formalized definitions of organic, and why other practices associated with industrialized agriculture, like synthetic inputs and GMOs, became central focal points of organic regulations in Canada and the US.

Over eight chapters, The Changing Politics of Organic Food in North America explores how the involvement of advocates, practitioners, consumers, governments and corporations in building formal definitions of organic have influenced the evolving politics of organic food in Canada and the US. Chapter 2 begins by identifying the transformative effects industrialization had on agriculture in Canada and the US throughout the twentieth century. It then explores two contending conceptions of organic – described as the ‘process-based’ and the ‘product-based’. The process-based definition is built upon a combination of interconnected social,
ecological and economic principles that are meant to guide practices, and which were evident in the early organic movement. This definition is traditionally associated with organic agriculture. The competing ‘product-based’ definition is more reflective (rather than prescriptive) of the practices found in organic production systems, though it shares some characteristics with the process-based definition. It has become the dominant approach in practice because of limited attention given to outlining and formalizing preferred types of market relations and economic organization in the process-based definition of organic (Clark, 2007). This conception is more instrumental in nature by virtue of emphasizing the practices that directly influence the material qualities of the end product, such as restrictions of synthetic inputs like GMOs. The chapter demonstrates that as a result of a lack of clarity and emphasis on crucial factors in the development of organic principles, the process-based definition of organic failed to make serious headway in the 1970s as the market for organic products expanded.

Chapter 3 traces the historical development of corporate activity in the conventional and organic agri-food sectors in Canada and the US in relation to the development of the product-based definition of organic. Corporate actors have applied many competitive business models found in the conventional agri-food sector to the organic sector. The discussion identifies three dominant corporate strategies applied to the organic agri-food sector starting in the 1980s: consolidation of ownership through mergers and acquisitions, strategic alliances and brand introduction. The successful application of these strategies has influenced patterns of ownership within the organic sector. It has also influenced how organic food is regulated and monitored in the food system.

The development of organic standards and regulations at multiple levels of governance has significantly changed various aspects of organic agriculture since the 1980s, effectively entrenching the product-based conception. Chapter 4 looks at how organic standards originally developed at the local level through producer-based associations became part of regulatory frameworks designed for conventional agriculture. It traces the creation of national standards, examining how various actors influenced American and Canadian regulatory frameworks. It also explores how regulations were designed to incorporate organic agriculture into the global trade regime by diminishing the role of process in the evaluation of organic foods, which limits the ability to include socio-economic principles in formalized definitions. As the market for organic products expanded, top-down forces of regulation and harmonization of standards in the global trade regime imposed downward pressures on bottom-up efforts to include more process-based features to the evaluation of
organic foods. Chapter 5 expands the discussion surrounding policy to include international trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and those administered through the WTO (i.e., the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) Agreement), to explore how these regulations apply to organic food circulating in the global economy. It takes a closer look at the role ‘product equivalence’ has in the rules and standards applicable to traded organic foods and how the concept of ‘like’ products in trade agreements influences how organic foods are evaluated in relation to formal standards.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore the changing political dynamics of the organic movement from its beginnings until the 2010s. Chapter 6 uses the policy process model to examine the actors, institutions and ideas that composed the early organic movement (McAdam et al., 1996). It argues that a number of other social movements emerging in the 1960s, such as the environmental and sustainable agriculture movements, helped the organic movement to expand its membership and broaden its appeal to the mainstream. It also discusses how, as professional organizations entered the organic sector (that coincided with the rise of the product-based approach), its status as a social movement changed. Chapter 7 addresses the dramatic influence that corporate actors had on the objectives and structure of the organic social movement, presenting the evolution of the contemporary organic movement and how it has moved away from being classified as a textbook ‘social movement’ as the product-based definition of organic gained ground. The current incarnation of the movement is better understood from an advocacy network perspective (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; 2000) that involves a variety of actors (governments, corporations) that are typically the target of social protest. The inclusion of these new actors had significant implications for the applicability of the process-based definition of organic in the mainstream in the 1980s, yet there continues to be a social movement contingent within the broader network that remains committed to the process-based definition of organic. Chapter 8 concludes by taking a closer look at the current status of the organic movement and the organic market as organic food has taken its place in the mainstream food system. It discusses what lessons can be drawn from the evolving relationships between actors, institutions and ideas associated with organic food and suggests some possible futures for the politics of organic food and other food movements as demand continues to expand for alternatives to conventional food in a globalized food system.