

THE CONCEPT OF ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURE AND ITS SUITABILITY TO FOMENT RURAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Xosé A. Armesto López

Dep. Geografia Física i Anàlisi Geogràfica Regional, Universitat de Barcelona

Organic Agriculture is an alternative way of understanding the agrarian practice that is progressively gaining supporters in the countryside, regardless of the scale of analysis. The present article aims to present a summary of the most important ideas imbuing the essence of this agro-social movement known as Organic Agriculture, and to set out ways in which the movement can participate as a tool for achieving greater rural sustainable development.

Parting from the base that any human action is an alteration of the original ecosystem, it becomes immediately evident to consider agrarian practice as a modification of the original settings. Even so, agrarian activities can have impacts that are more or less unfavorable, according to the productive philosophy under which they are practiced. Thus, alteration and the consequent undesirable impacts exercised on the environment by productivist agricultural practice, which is what characterized the majority of the countryside of the most economically developed countries from, above all, the end of the Second World War, have been a constant in recent years. In the face of this uniformizing tendency, productive models that seek to reconcile environmental aspects with economic and social ones have emerged. Organic Agriculture is the most notable example in this proposed new line.

No single definition exists for Organic Agriculture. Thus, from the different denominations it takes according to language and country (ecological, biological, organic...) and leaving aside the nuances that can be introduced into each one of these, the different associations and organizations that define it propose different concepts: examples in this sense are those proposed from the European Union (EU), the National Organic Standards Board of the United States, the Department of Agriculture of the United States, or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Of all of these, it is the definition proposed by the *International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements* (IFOAM) that seems most complete, since it includes in its basic principles questions that go beyond the agronomic perspective and

beyond the economic viewpoint, introducing itself into the field of social justice and of general organic principles, which ends up providing it with a greater transversality and, thus, with a clearly holistic character.

The antecedents to the appearance of this new productive tendency go back to the close of the nineteenth century, being framed in the pioneering work of contemporary ecology, although the first experiences and scientific dissertations in this respect are the work of the Austrian philosopher and scientist Rudolf Steiner who, in the decade of the 1920s, sowed the seeds of what can be considered one of the most influential and purist schools of Organic Agriculture, that known as Biodynamic Agriculture.

In reality, Organic Agriculture began to get popularized, ceasing to be merely anecdotal, from the decade of the 60s of the past century. That time was clearly rich and challenging from the point of view of the creation of alternative theories. So the origins of modern Organic Agriculture must be situated in the alternative groups of the 1960s which have as a final philosophy the attainment of a better world; and that world would begin to be built by a radical change in the relations between humans and the primary productive systems.

Not, however, until the 1980s will the administrations begin to realize the importance these productive modes can come to have in the future. In Europe, the Scandinavian countries and those of the center of the continent will be the first to legislate these new forms of understanding agriculture, and which basically recover a large part of the agrarian knowledge of the past. From the 1990s, a new phase can be established in the development of Organic Agriculture, since it is then that the massive emergence comes about in authenticity certifications that guarantee the quality of the product and the production methods used in conformity with a norm. This is the moment of generalizing and unifying the European logotypes that will serve to differentiate for the consumer between products of organic origin and conventional products.

The final section of this article approaching the concept of Organic Agriculture will consider the concept as a tool to aid in achieving rural development on a local scale, since, in principle, these productive modes will serve to reconcile those once antagonistic viewpoints, economy, society, and ecology. Hence, Organic Agriculture will fulfill the six precepts on which the new policy of Rural Development of the EU is based, since:

- it improves agrarian exploitations;
- it guarantees the innocuousness and the quality of food products;
- it guarantees farmers equal and stable incomes;
- it takes into account the challenges represented by environmental questions;
- it promotes complementary or alternative activities and with this contributes to palliating the rural exodus, maintaining the social and productive fabric of the European traditional rural world;
- it improves conditions of life and work and equality of opportunities.

Therefore, Organic Agriculture should be considered as a common place in which the productive trends of the present rural world should converge if society desires to bring closer this sustainability of the rural medium. Innovation, conservation, participation and integration are necessarily present as fundamental dimensions in the new European countryside project

framed from the ecological ideary. Doubtless this philosophy, influenced by a certain crisis of values intrinsic to modernity of a fundamentally urban cut, to agriculture and livestock breeding, and in general to the rural medium, will be required to furnish a series of functions not immediately available without the productive and ethical readjustment that must accompany this new form of understanding human-medium-production relations.

Definitively, it can be concluded that Organic Agriculture is an adaptation to the modern requirements of quality and healthiness of pre-industrial food products, at least in terms of risks derived from the chemical applications of the industry. At the same time, it is a movement of greater depth that transcends the agrarian fact to include itself in questions about the future of humanity and that of the planet itself.

