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Introducing Utopia

I had been living on his farm for almost a month when Daniel[1] invited me to a meeting of the Certification Committee of the Nova Scotia Organic Growers' Association (NSOGA). This was to be my first introduction to many organic farmers, but more importantly, it was the first time I would encounter them as a formal group. Since the start of my research into the politics and ideals of organic farmers, I had repeatedly heard people use the term "organic community," referring loosely to all those in the vicinity who shared their convictions and participated in some way in the production and consumption of organic food. And yet for all the talk of community, coupled with references to keeping things "local," these people were scattered widely over most of the province of Nova Scotia, and rarely met in groups of more than a few people. I thought this meeting would finally give me a chance to see the organic community in action.

Since the organization did not have its own headquarters, organizers had booked a room at the Kentville Agricultural Research Station. We carpooled with two other organic growers (as they tended to call themselves) for the hour-and-a-half drive, and talked for much of the way about a government proposal to double the number of lanes on the highway, something my companions vehemently opposed. When we turned into the research station I remarked on how well-kept the place looked. The grounds around the station were pristine, its trees spaced perfectly around a large rolling yard, and the grass seeded and mown to astro-turf perfection. Anne responded with the jibe "this is *the model* for conventional farming," implying that the perfection of the grounds had a distastefully controlled appearance, a sterile landscape which was contrary to the dishevelled landscapes which all the passengers enjoyed, indeed cultivated, on their own farms. Getting out of the car, Daniel pointed to some patches of uncovered earth. "I guess the flower budget was cut this year," he said, highlighting that in the Kentville version of agriculture, even flowers were a bureaucratic, rather than a natural or aesthetic matter. Nor did the criticisms of the place stop there. Inside, people complained about the poor ventilation in the building and, later, about headaches, which they attributed to the fluorescent lights.

This meeting place was not just functional — it was also symbolic, a

place to be commented on as part of a ritual affirmation of collective values. One of the main ways that the organic community was bound together was through this opposition to everything that the research station symbolized. To be organic, if nothing else, meant being critical of what the organic community calls "conventional farming." Otherwise, the diverse bunch who entered the room, from young students who had just moved onto some leased land, to well-established farm couples who had been in the business for as long as thirty years, seemed to have little in common.

Over the next four hours about three dozen people entered the room and were divided into work groups charged with assessing applications for organic certification. This was a preliminary review, later to be followed up with a farm inspection, to see if applicants met the basic standards required to call one's produce "organic" in the market. Most were there to renew their certifications, others had been going through the process for a year or two, and several more had just bought their land. Two couples were long-time conventional farmers hoping to start the conversion process toward organic certification, a process that on average takes three years and requires major and detailed changes of farming techniques.

The meeting itself was uneventful as far as I was concerned, and I too was getting a headache. But as we were leaving, Anne made a striking reflection on the evening. She said, "You really know that the organic growers have been to Kentville when there's a whole meeting and the toilet doesn't get flushed once!" An interesting calling-card, I thought, one that appealed to Anne's ironic sense of the group's identity. While I hadn't been surprised by the bathroom etiquette, since most organic growers see constant flushing as a waste of water, Anne's remark made the group's habitual behaviour suddenly symbolic. It evoked several clusters of meaning that are central to the organic community, particularly the earthiness which organic growers use to distinguish themselves from the impeccable farmscape outside. It also made me think of the meeting place not just as a place of convenience, but also as a kind of mischievous invasion, a symbolic violation of the conventional agriculture industry so deeply written into the rural world that surrounded all of their own farms.

This book is an exploration of that invasion, the parameters of which are at once political, practical and aesthetic. It is about a small group of organic farmers who have moved into rural Nova Scotia from a number of other places, bringing with them the baggage of a loosely shared utopian vision of a cleaner, more egalitarian world. Most organic farmers believe that such a vision can intrinsically change the food industry. In this abstract way, they see their project to be allied with that of other small farmers, rural food producers whose livelihoods have been made increasingly difficult by restructuring in the food industry, by costly technology and input requirements, by a monopolistic retail sector and by competi-

tion with giant and semi-corporate farms. And so it is also a book about realignments, about conversations and coalitions and about the social and cultural contexts in which these occur. It does not seek to explain the logic of the organic project, nor to talk about the relationship between organic farming, the environment and health; all that has been done elsewhere. It tries instead to understand the messy ways in which ideals, sometimes very strong ones, are reconciled with people's attempts to make a living and get along with their neighbours. In more general terms, this is a book about political projects and how they are made to work or fail in the real world, told through the story of organic farmers cultivating utopia on the rocky soils of Nova Scotia.

Insurgent Utopias

Most organic farmers in Nova Scotia are not just out to grow chemical-free cucumbers and make a quick buck: they are out to change the world, even if only in a small way. As such, they fit the mold of what David Harvey (2000) calls "insurgent architects." The term refers back to Karl Marx, who once famously said "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality" (1967: 178). Whatever else he may have been saying about the dehumanizing effects of the labour process, one thing he was clearly pointing to was the human capacity for intentional action, and hence the ability to create models of a world that has yet to be made. Insurgent architects are those who confront the world having already raised in their imaginations a vision of social justice, whose lives are lived according to models of what could be. They are, to use an even more ambiguous term, utopians, and their lives are lived as a kind of negotiation between the real world and the utopias toward which they are always progressing (Marin 1984).

There are many ways of talking about organic farming, and many more rigorous than conjuring utopia, but I think it is an appropriate evocation because it reminds us that organic farming is part of a long tradition of political thought in Western culture. It is a genre that shaped and motivated many a radical movement before tractors and pesticides had even been invented. Carolyn Merchant (2003) has argued that today's utopian thinking is deeply implicated in a modern reading of Christianity. Its most recent manifestations can be seen in both the faith in technology and globalization to solve the world's problems, and the radical and ecological movements that propose quite opposite solutions. However opposed these utopian visions may be to each other, each one is predicated on loss, on the expulsion of humanity from some kind of imagined Eden, and a narrative of recovery of that same Eden through human action. I don't mean to suggest that the bible provides an origin or even a necessary reference point, for organic farming, but rather to

show that the idea of utopia, and the nether space which it opens between a romantic past and a possible future is deeply constitutive of the modern Western experience.

We owe the word, of course, to Sir Thomas More, whose 1516 novel, *Utopia*, spoke of a perfect island society ruled by a benevolent despot. The famous name of the island is a Greek pun: it can either be taken to mean *eutopia*, "good place," or *outopia*, "no place," and it is this very ambiguity which gives utopia its force as an idea (Levitas 1990). More's book was above all an ironic critique of European society. But by finding its "good place" on a far-away island only two decades after Columbus first sighted the Caribbean, the book was speaking to another element of European experience, the fantasy that such a society might exist among the far-away isles that Europe was just then beginning to explore and colonize.

This kind of imagining, often without More's ironic distance, proliferated in novels and philosophical treatises through Europe for much of the next three centuries. According to Ralph Trouillot (1991), utopia, like the closely related category of the "savage," became a discursive slot into which peoples and places could be inserted in order to critique aspects of European society. While calling peoples of the New World savages was a way to talk about Europe's greatness, looking for utopia was a way to talk about what Europe lacked, and even though its initial impetus was in fiction, utopia also became the object of earnest and bloody quests. One need only think of El Dorado, the Noble Savage and early anthropology for examples of crusades that devastatingly ascribed utopian ideals to newly colonized lands.

As the promises of exploration waned, and as the geographical dimension of utopia gave way to a temporal dimension,[2] the common place one went to find utopias was the future, or even the past. In nineteenth century romanticism, which often celebrated pastoral aesthetics and lifestyles, the utopian imagination created critiques of the Industrial Revolution in which the future was more like the past than the present. The poor but "authentic" peasants of rural Europe, living in verdant hills off the fruits of their own labour, came to inhabit their own corner of the utopia in the minds of romantic smog-choked urbanites.

The most famous in this genre is perhaps William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1905), in which the protagonist wakes up in twenty-first century London and finds that:

> London has been decentralized, keeping some of the best older parts but restoring some of the slum areas to separate small towns and villages. The industrial manufacturing cities have… disappeared. Most of the smaller towns have survived, with their centres cleared; the suburbs have "melted away into the general country."… It is an imagined old London, before industrialism and the metropolitan expansion, and a projected new London, in

> the contemporary sense of the garden city. (quoted in Williams 1973: 273)

Industrialism, hierarchy and mindless labour all gave way in this future to a pastoral egalitarianism in which communities were self-governing, work was aesthetic and rewarding, and production was accomplished by skilled craftspeople and not by factories. Of course, Morris's vision was not simply pastoral, it involved a deft marriage of the romantic aesthetic with a Marxist critique of alienation and class conflict: London's utopian "nowhere" is a future London, transformed by proletarian revolution.

At the same time as Morris was crafting his vision in fiction, others were busy inbuing a very similar utopia with the persuasion of science, and with it the reassuring certainty of "nature." The most influential writer in this tradition was Petr Kropotkin (1902), a Russian anarchist who argued that cooperative living was not only good and necessary, but was in fact a return to humanity's natural state. The late nineteenth century was a time when many authors interpreted strife between people as a continuation of human evolution, and therefore natural and right (a point of view which became, if anything, more entrenched in the twentieth century). But as people like Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer (who actually coined the expression "survival of the fittest") were arguing that capitalism was an outgrowth of biology and therefore necessary for the continuation of the species, Kropotkin argued for a radically different reading of Charles Darwin. He suggested that on the whole, cooperation between members of a species was far more important to survival than competition, and cited this as the primary reason for the evolutionary success of humans (Macauley 1998).

For our purposes, what makes both Morris's romantic and Kropotkin's biological utopias so interesting is their striking effect on the rising environmentalism of the 1960s and 1970s, and on the flourishing of the organics movement. They provided ecological utopianism, in its early stages, with its two necessary ingredients: a social model and a theory of human nature that made the model unquestionable. The following passage from Murray Bookchin's *Toward an Ecological Society* (1980), a treatise that exemplifies the utopian extreme of more recent environmentalist thought, illustrates the influence of both:

> In short, we hope for a revolution which will produce politically independent communities whose boundaries and populations will be defined by a new ecological consciousness; communities whose inhabitants will define themselves within the framework of this new consciousness and the nature and level of their technologies, the forms taken by their social structures, world views, lifestyles, expressive arts, and all the other aspects of their daily lives. (1980: 45)

This vision of the future, which Bookchin himself calls "utopian thinking," lies at the heart of some of the motivations of organic farmers discussed in this book. Bookchin thinks of this mode of thinking as a way of reflecting on the world and organizing our actions within it. "The power of utopian thinking," he says, "properly conceived as a vision of a new society that questions *all* the presuppositions of the present-day society, is its inherent ability to see the future in terms of radically new forms of values" (ibid.: 280).

The Sociology of Utopia

Literary and academic utopias are one thing. But how do we place the idea of utopia in its context in the real world? Who adopts these kinds of ideas, how do they turn them into projects, and what are the effects of such projects? The first person to attempt such a sociological analysis was Karl Mannheim, and his highly idiosyncratic text, *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), is one with which all analysts of utopia must wrestle. Mannheim's main goal was to elaborate a sociology of knowledge that explored the frictions between reality and the way people think about reality. Ideological and utopian thinking, he said, were characterized by their tendency to "transcend reality." What distinguished them from each other was that the distortion implicated in ideology tended to preserve the status quo, while those called utopian tended to transform it: "those [mental] orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time" (ibid.: 192). Mannheim's main addition to our conversation, then, is his insistence that utopia involves some kind of praxis, that it describes a normative code of practice which both challenges the existing social system and, over time, establishes a new one.

I am not suggesting that we turn to Mannheim for a model, but rather that aspects of his work offer us suggestive starting points in our own explorations of utopian movements.[3] There are three points in Mannheim's book, each of which has generated considerable criticism and revision from later scholars, that deserve our attention. The first is Mannheim's assertion that "the key to the intelligibility of utopias is the structural situation of that social stratum which at any given time espouses them" (ibid.: 187). Here he underscores the common view that utopian ideas emerge from class struggle and that the groups that unite to embrace utopias are coherently related to each other by class experience. Now while we don't need to accept Mannheim's belief that only the oppressed classes generate true utopias, this still does not diminish the significance of class to the understanding of instances of utopian thinking, and indeed, one of the most significant points of cohesion in the organic community is a shared middle-class background and the values, tastes and aspirations that come with it.

The second point comes from an ambivalence in Mannheim's writing

about whether utopia is to be understood as a cure-all to static forms of domination and is always to be encouraged, or whether it has the potential to become a kind of blindness to reality which is "incapable of correctly diagnosing an existing condition of society" and "turns its back on everything which would shake its belief or paralyze its desire to change things" (ibid.: 36). Organic farmers are always negotiating between the sanctified utopian ideas that drive people to farm organically and the "condition of society" within which they become embedded when they move to the country and begin farming. Often, organic utopianism congeals into a kind of orthodoxy, what Louis Marin (1984: 195) sardonically describes as "an ideological critique of ideology." In these instances, the organic community retreats into itself, criticizes those around it and is unwilling to accommodate any difference of opinion. But just as often there is a give-and-take that occurs, a conversation with neighbours, dealing with markets and the necessities of life that make the organic utopia a much more flexible process.

This relates to the third and most complex difficulty: the question of how the utopian mentality "passes over into conduct" and shatters "the order of things." Ruth Levitas (1990) points out that this aspect of Mannheim's theory of utopia is far too simplistic. Utopia at some level straddles both the realm of critical fantasy and that of practical project. It involves some intention to change "the order of things," but since its goal is predicated on a simplified picture of a possible world, it can never actually realize its plan. Invoking the work of Raymond Williams (1977), Levitas suggests that a looser conception of the social "order of things," full of fissures, contradictions and alternate possibilities would allow breathing space for a utopia which, rather than "shattering" reality, nudges at its contours, probes its limits, and shifts its focal points.

These three aspects of utopia provide the basic framework for the three key questions that motivate this book. First, who are organic farmers and how do they do what they do? Second, how do they maintain their vision of the world, and how does that vision lapse at times into dogmatism? And third, how do they deal with the problems they encounter in the world of farming and farmers? As I elaborate in the next chapter, there have been many scholarly attempts to describe the organic farm movement, and most tend to emphasize one or another of these questions, leading them to three distinct analytic strategies. I suggest, using each to draw out different aspects of the history of organic farming, that each of these strategies has its merit, and I devote the rest of the book to following them in turn.

In chapters three and four, I present a sociological account of who organic farmers are, and the context in which they farm. One of my primary arguments there is that, since they come from a very different class background than most farmers, they tend to develop certain kinds of friction with the rural communities into which they move. In chapters

five and six, I undertake a more discursive analysis of the organic project, showing how it differs from the world-views of conventional farmers. In those chapters, devoted respectively to the notions of community and the local, I suggest that tensions between organic growers and their neighbours may be exacerbated by underlying assumptions that they bring to the encounter. Finally, in chapter seven, I profile three farms that I think have moved beyond the kind of dogmatism that can hamper organic farmers' relations with neighbours and can actually get in the way of some of their social and political goals. Through these three farms we will revisit utopia as a guiding concept in chapter eight. Ultimately, of course, we are aiming for a kind of utopia that pushes past Mannheim's questions by refusing altogether the distinction between thought and reality on which the analysis rest. This is the kind of utopia that cannot be out of step with the real world because it is part of the world.

Authorship and Waking Up

The organic community's occasionally antagonistic relationship with other farmers and other rural populations can be very difficult for new organic farmers, who must constantly negotiate their two social worlds. On the one hand, their political identity is wrapped up in the symbols and practices of the organic community. On the other hand, the practicalities of living from organic farming, the economic difficulties and the social isolation that many feel usually catch up with them. Almost every grower I talked to about their experiences has a story about what they call the "wake-up call," after which most stop farming for good. As for the handful that wakes up and keeps going, their conceptions of the world, the natural environment and farming practice all undergo major changes. In a strange way, many of these people become partial outsiders to the organic community, because they have seriously considered the gap between their model of the world and other realities and relations with which they are faced.

I bring this up here because when one talks about utopian projects, implying complex models of the world, of nature, of humanity and prescriptions for conduct, one's position with regard to that knowledge, to the practices it entails and the communities that grow up around it determines how one reads it. And the reading that I offer in the form of this book is no exception. It arises from my own particular, and still changing, relationship to organic food, radical politics, middle-class Canadian life and critical academic discourse.

Long before I decided to do a critical study of organic agriculture I was already a young participant in related utopias. I had called myself a vegetarian for over a decade, a political statement that I justified with figures casually culled from *Diet for a Small Planet* (Lappé 1971). I had also called myself an environmentalist, shouted slogans, waved placards, worn T-shirts and made what I called "informed consumer decisions." More

recently I had become interested in organic foods as a natural extension of both of these concerns. I had sat around many a table extolling the virtues of an organic bean or broccoli floret and linked these through several layers of abstraction to a view of the present world and alternatives for its future. I always recognized at some level that what I was doing in these conversations was reproducing, with little critical reflection, an ideological position, or what I would later, in the writing of this book, come to call a utopian one. But I had never stopped really to reflect on what that meant or on the effects that views like mine might really be having in the world. This research began, in part, as a corrective to that personal naivety, or rather as a series of questions about assumptions that I carried around with me outside of university life. I enrolled in an anthropology graduate program at Dalhousie University, read a pile of books about the politics of agriculture and started looking for a place to do fieldwork. In the summer of 2000, I set out with a critical chip on my shoulder, ambiguously combined with an intense desire to learn more about how organic farmers managed to do what they did.

That is how I ended up living on two organic farms near the Annapolis Valley in Nova Scotia wearing two different hats. On the one hand, taking advantage of a long-standing tradition in the organic community known as WWOOFing (named after an organization called Willing Workers On Organic Farms), I volunteered my labour in return for meals and a place to stay. In this respect I was Kregg, the intern, learning the organic way of life through direct experience. I used the opportunity to hang around asking questions about the ideas and ideals of those around me and spent my free time visiting, working with and interviewing other organic and non-organic farmers in the area. Spending time with conventional farmers was a vital part of the research, which was designed to take for granted as little as possible about agricultural practices, and although in the end I spent much more time with organic farmers than with conventional ones, I tried to keep two comparative samples, covering about ten farms in each category.[4] In talking to both I quickly became aware that there was a large social gap between them, and this became one of the primary themes of my research.

Positioning myself as an insider to the movement created advantages and problems. It gave me intimate contact with the machinations of organic food producers and allowed me to question closely the way they conceived of their project. My position as avowed sympathizer and participant (if primarily in planting and weeding) allowed me to ask direct and difficult questions. On the other hand, this same positioning became an unquestionable impediment when I went to get information from conventional farmers. I was associated by everyone with the organic community, not just because I was living with community members, but also because my long hair and beard always gave me away as “one of them.” This immediately implicated me in a social division that separated

organic and conventional farmers in the communities where I worked.

By questioning organic farmers more closely, and as a result critiquing their discourse more rigorously than that of conventional farmers with whom I had less contact, this project is in part about my own convictions and political sympathies. During my more critical moments, I am critiquing a set of discourses and practices that are very familiar parts of my life. In order to get under the presuppositions of the organic world-view in this study, a world-view that I share in most respects, I have had to dig in at some vulnerable points. In the end, I found plenty of people within the movement questioning it themselves in highly productive ways. Even though they do not make an explicit appearance until near the end of this book, it is those organic farmers who most criticize their own utopian orthodoxies who gave me the critical edge I needed to do this analysis.

The ultimate goal behind doing this research and writing this book was always to think critically about how we mobilize around environmental issues and to add to a literature on the problems and directions in the agri-food system in industrialized countries. I believe we need to think very carefully about the way we grow, distribute and consume food, and organic farmers are people who have devoted their lives to this pursuit. But I also believe that the attainment of a less ecologically harmful and more equitable food system will be a long, complicated road full of negotiation and dialogue. A lack of understanding between visionaries of the movement and members of the established food system, especially those farmers who are consistently exploited or undercut by factory farms and retail chains, is ultimately detrimental to a critical reappraisal of the food system. This book, therefore, is itself a call for a kind of utopia, one that avoids, as much as possible, the pitfalls of orthodoxy, and embraces the complex and varied ways of understanding our own political ideals and the world in which they exist.

Notes

1. People's names have all been changed, although for those close to the research, there will be no disguising some identities. In order to increase anonymity I have changed some details of people's lives. There are also a couple of composite characters created to bear the responsibility for some of the more contentious material.
2. In science-fiction utopias, of course, the geographical dimension is often widened to include space travel, finding a realm where one can still hope to find "other worlds."
3. I am indebted to Ricoeur's (1986) very generous reading of Mannheim for opening up this approach.
4. See Appendix A for more details of the research sample and process.