'DEEP ORGANICS': A PERSONAL DESIGN-APPROACH TO ORGANIC FARMING[1]

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Abstract

My aim in this paper is to support the thinking and actions of others in enabling organics to continue to develop in ways that will permit it to make increasingly significant contributions to sustainability and wellbeing. This will require us to emphasise higher values-based redesign/design initiatives over substitution and efficiency ones. Furthermore, we will need to understand that changes in our agriculture and food systems are intimately linked with those in both our institutions and within ourselves. Such transformation is part of the ongoing psychosocial co-evolution of our species from socialising to enabling cultures. This development may be regarded at a developmental progression from 'shallow' to 'deep' organics.

Key Words: deep organics, design/redesign, sustainability, wellbeing, transformation.

Introduction

In 1974 I helped establish, and became Director of, what for a time was the largest resource centre in the world on sustainable and ecological (including organic) agriculture, 'Ecological Agriculture Projects' (EAP: www.eap.mcgill.ca). In 1978 EAP co-organised with the 'Mouvement pour une Agriculture Biologique' (MAB: led by Clement Boulanger) the very successful 2nd IFOAM International Conference in Montreal (Hill & Ott 1982). This was the first IFOAM conference at which half the presenters were reporting on experiences in the tropics and the southern hemisphere; and funding for travel and accommodation was obtained for 21 of those speakers. In the Preface of the Proceedings I wrote the following, which disturbingly is as relevant today as it was 24 years ago!

> *"The publication of these proceedings is timely, for there is a growing demand for the kind of information that is contained within the papers. Reduced availability of certain resources and a growing awareness of the need to safeguard environmental health, together with the increasing popularity of futures studies, and of the values changes that they imply, have combined to create an environment in which organic farming is beginning to receive serious attention, by food system professionals, farmers and consumers alike. Its potential to reduce some of our resource and environmental problems and, at the same time, take into account our cultural and spiritual needs will, I believe, become more significant as we approach the end of the century. By then, we will probably be involved in the most significant cultural revolution that our species has witnessed, and we may look back on some of these papers and regard them as prophetic. I would rather, however, that we responded to them now and thereby avoid the traumas that we will undoubtedly experience if we wait to heed such warnings." (p. 10).*

Despite some significant progress, we have not achieved the hoped for changes that we collectively dreamed of at that time, and we are daily learning about the consequences of this

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failure to transform ourselves and our ways of being in the world. I believe that we need to reflect on what might be preventing us, including most of us involved in organics, from designing agriculture and food systems that are genuinely ecologically sustainable and enabling of wellbeing, these being among the primary goals of those committed to organic systems . Firstly this will require us to clarify and act on our 'higher' values, overcome our denials and postponements, and name and deal with behaviours and practices that are inconsistent with these values. From this perspective the choice facing us today within organics of trying to obtain a growing market share within our present food systems or of leading the movement to design and transform these systems into ones that are compatible with our higher values becomes immediately clear. Secondly we will have to become much clearer about the relationships between our personal development (Hill 1991a, 2001a, 2003a) and the transformation of our communities and institutional structures and processes (Hill 2005) and our food systems (Hill 1998, 2001b, Hill & MacRae 1992, MacRae *et al.* 1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1993). Distressed, acting-out individuals cannot design and maintain genuinely sustainable and wellbeing-enabling systems, and such systems cannot thrive within similarly distressed cultures. So, until organics incorporates transformative agendas in both of these areas into its food system agendas these will continue to be limited in their success. This is clear for me by reflecting on the relatively little progress that has been made since I wrote the statement quoted above, but also from the extraordinary success I have witnessed when strategies for change have involved the three areas I have mentioned (Hill & MacRae 1992).

Based on this understanding, I will highlight what I regard as some of the main strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for organics as currently practiced by most within the industry; and I particularly want to emphasise the importance of embracing what I call 'Deep Organics' as a shared goal (Hill, 1991b, 1998, 2000) in addressing these.

'Deep Organics'

I first drew a distinction between Shallow and Deep Organics in relation to my work on pest control 22 years ago (Hill 1984: see also Hill 1985, 2004a, Hill *et al.* 1999). Farms, as with all systems, have aspects that run smoothly and that do not generate problems, and aspects that do not work well and that consequently generate a range of problems (short- and long-term, near and far, direct and indirect, obvious and subtle). If these problems are pests, in conventional agriculture they are usually regarded as enemies and sprayed with synthetic biocides (as such chemicals affect the biology of organisms the term pesticide is inappropriate as it is the economic or nuisance properties that makes an organism a pest, and chemicals cannot distinguish on this basis). Criticisms of this practice have led primarily to two responses: the more 'efficient' use of the biocide (method of application, timing, placement, use of an economic threshold and monitoring of pest numbers, etc), and the 'substitution' of more benign interventions (botanicals, biological controls etc.) and alternative strategies (traps, repellents, mating disruption, etc.).

Parallels may be recognised in all areas where problems are encountered, including soils, veterinary, medicine, throughout society and in our personal lives. These strategies that are directed at symptoms are what I critically refer to as 'Shallow' approaches, as in 'Shallow Organics'. Although such approaches may be vital as holding strategies that may be needed while ways can be found to take 'Deep' approaches, and as stepping stones towards the latter, they must never be regarded as end points. This is because they draw our attention away from the underlying causes of the problems, the maldesign and mismanagement of the systems involved.

The third stage in this progression, beyond 'efficiency' and 'substitution' towards 'deep' organics, involves the structural and managerial 'redesign/design' of the systems involved, so that they can be, as much as possible, self-maintaining, self-regulating, and problem-proof. Problems are then regarded not just as enemies to be attacked, but rather as valuable sources of informative feedback (indicators) from our designs and management approaches, which therefore need to be critically examined and changed appropriately. The most benign curative approaches may then be used – as short-term emergency measures – while we find ways to address the problems at the causative level (Hill & MacRae 1995). I have recently reviewed this approach in relation to agricultural pests (Hill 2004a).

My interest in this design approach led me to the work of P.A. Yeomans. His 'Keyline' system of landscape design and management (with his inclusion of rotational grazing: Voisin & Lecomte 1962) pioneered whole agroecosystem design in our region (Hill 2003b, 2006, *in press*, Mulligan & Hill 2001, A.J. Yeomans 2005, K. Yeomans 2002, P. A. Yeomans 1958, 1971, 1978). The benefits of taking such an approach invariable extend beyond the initial motivation. Thus, Allan Yeomans (P.A. Yeomans' second son, who manufactures an improved version of the Yeomans Plow: www.yeomansplow.com.au) has recently calculated that by practicing Keyline landscape management, Australia could fix more carbon annually (in the soil as humus – much more than could be captured by planting trees!) than it releases from all fossil-fuel burning; and that this could play a key role during the inevitable transition from non-renewable to solar-based energy systems, and to the necessary reduced dependence on energy in all forms (A.J. Yeomans 2005). It should be noted that Keyline was a major source of inspiration for the development of Permaculture (Holmgren 2002, Mulligan & Hill 2001).

To progress towards such a 'Deeper' Organics most of us will need to be much clearer about the key strengths, weaknesses and opportunities associated with organics.

Strengths

For me, the key strength of organics is that it is a 'value-added' form of food production and handling that includes the following benefits (note: this aims to be a representative and not a comprehensive list).

Personal benefits

- For those involved, it provides access to more meaningful and fulfilling forms of farming, a sense of integration and connection, being less dependent, more creative, open to the unknown and unexplained, and that provide access to an interesting community and rich body of knowledge and skills, the satisfaction of knowing that the produce is more nourishing, the systems more sustainable, and having fewer adverse effects than most conventional systems.

Socio-cultural benefits

- Many organic farmers have direct marketing relationships with consumers, cutting out the cost-adding and profit-diluting middleman, and thereby enabling a two-way flow of information (including ongoing opportunities for learning) and appreciation.

- Organics provides a sound basis for the development of truly sustainable and wellbeing-enabling food systems (these key goals provide the basis for two of the most important 'testing questions' that I advocate asking of all our decisions and actions in organics, e.g., to what extent is what is being proposed in the service of these goals?).

- Since the 1950s, in many industrialised countries, it has been observed that significant numbers of young people from urban and suburban backgrounds have been moving to rural areas to farm organically (when so many young people from conventional farms have been leaving) and setting up 'small (appropriately-sized) farms'; these 'back-to-the-landers' tend to be more open to new ideas and experimentation, and don't suffer from the negative on-farm judgements from previous generations.

- Organics provides both tested and innovative models for rethinking the design and management of our institutional structures and processes (political, economic, business etc).

Ecological benefits

- It provides a sound basis for the design of ecologically sustainable managed ecosystems, within which natural capital and biodiversity can be maintained.

Other Features

- Deep Organics emphasises the proactive design and management of systems that enable genuine sustainability and wellbeing to be achieved; and it can contribute to the ongoing progressive psychosocial co-evolution of our species, from 'socialising' to 'enabling' cultures (deMause 1982, 2002, Hill 2003a, 2004b).

Weaknesses

The weaknesses within the current organic industry are similar to those within most other sectors, and within society as a whole; and most of these can be traced back through unsupportive and obstructive institutional structures and processes to personal psychological and relationship problems (Hill 2003a, Shem & Surrey 1998). These are areas where there is persistent denial, avoidance and postponement. Consequently, these are the areas that most require our attention, effort and creativity. Other areas needing attention include the following.

- Problems associated with responding to many of the same growth, supply, convenience and cosmetic standards pressures facing conventional producers, with the result that many organic farms superficially look no different than conventional ones.

- Organic standards limitations that are not supported by firm experimental data, especially concerning environmental impact.

- Growing vulnerability of organics to loss of market share to competing systems with clearer and more consumer-friendly standards and labels.

We are also weakened by our unwillingness to develop more sound bases and tests for our practices. Particularly vulnerable areas include the following.

- Greater ecological impact caused by some natural/botanical biocides than by some alternative synthetics.

- The mining of soils by, and unsustainable practices of, some organic producers.

- The organic movement's still weak and often confused position on genetic engineering.

- The persistent internal divisions and animosities within the organic movement (quite similar to those among the world's religions!).

- The persistent lack of adequate communication to the general public, and their still relatively low confidence in the validity and value of organically labelled produce.

- Labelling that is often unattractive, unclear and incomplete.

- The still relatively low influence and poor image of organics in governments, and in research and educational institutions (most of the anti-organics groups being better funded and organised).

Opportunities

Opportunities for progress exist in all of the areas identified above. Failures are often linked to the common tendency to point the finger at others in an effort to blame and find excuses for our lack of progress; and also to over-focus on mega-projects, which are invariably abandoned after only the initial fact-finding stages have been completed. What is needed most, however, is acceptance of responsibility, securing reliable sources of funding, the initiation of innovative individual and small group projects, and publicising the findings so that others may copy and be inspired by them. The most effective larger scale projects will be

those that support and enable the initiation, conduct, spread and evolution of these smaller meaningful projects.

Conclusions

Because of the enormous effects of farming on the environment and our wellbeing, and because of the commitment and potential within organics to address these two areas, the organic movement is ideally placed to make major contributions towards the progressive development of our species. This will only happen, however, if we critically examine and take initiatives in relation to our strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. Our programs for change must integrate personal, social and food system transformation. This can be helped, I believe, by regarding this as a transition from 'Shallow' to considerably 'Deeper' systems of organic farming and landscape design and management. We can do it. We must do it. We will do it!

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