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American Organic
Introduction

“The Revolution has begun,” pronounced J. I. Rodale, the editor of Organic Gardening magazine, in 1947. Brimming with optimism, he told his sixty thousand readers that the burgeoning organic farming and gardening movement was “gaining strength and numbers each year.” Rodale’s troops rallied, touting the benefits of food grown with all-natural humus, decaying organic material. The avenues to success seemed paved with (pesticide-free) gold. The organic crusade was miniscule, but it implied a contrarian critique of conventional agriculture. As such, it drew fury from sovereignties that felt threatened by organic “extremists.” The chemical-laden agricultural regime excoriated compost aficionados. In 1950, an organic farmer who had learned from Rodale’s advice acknowledged that his own evangelical exertions were being mocked as “the silly outpourings of some new kind of crackpot.” Organic farming was bashed as a harebrained fallacy, fatuous pastime, and logistical failure. A report from 1960 from the Super Market Institute scoffed at “faddists” for falsely claiming that modern farmers using chemical fertilizers were undermining public health. US Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz declared in 1971 that “before we go back to organic agriculture, somebody is going to have to decide what 50 million people we are going to let starve.”

News articles often included the words “cult” or “craze” when writing about organic food. The paths of the gilded organic “revolution” were more arduous to traverse for those marching down them than Rodale had expected. Though scorned as hokum for decades, organics did make inroads from the periphery. Between alternating spells of passion and hyperbole, the organic movement seized credibility. As “sustainability” became a buzzword among environmentalists, organic farmers found themselves on an ecological and agricultural pedestal. Foodies revered organic baby-leaf mesclun greens. Gourmands began eating organic heirloom eggplants with gusto. Ethicurian eaters showed proclivity for socially responsible labels, while ecophiles meticulously hunted down earth-friendly ingredient lists. The cocktail cognoscenti
drank small-batch spirits distilled from 100 percent organic grain, while the juice bar crowd sipped fruity organic elixirs. Farmers’ market shoppers doted on organic red cored chantenay carrots. By 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama was enthusiastically planting seedlings for spinach, onions, cucumbers, and peas in the new White House organic garden. Celebrity chefs Bobby Flay and Emeril Lagasse were touring organic farms and cooking organic meals on their Food Network television programs. Supermodel Claudia Schiffer swore that she would eat only organic food. Highbrow culinary circles were obsessed with organic Russian Banana fingerling potatoes, organic ancient spelt, and organic baby back pork ribs. Upscale resorts were cultivating organic herbs, flowers, and vegetables for their posh restaurant and spa guests. Oprah Winfrey was tilling the fertile soil on her organic farm in Maui and donating the organic radicchio, beets, turnips, and Swiss chard to charities. The Organic Trade Association (OTA) launched “Organic. It’s worth it,” a national consumer education and marketing campaign that included a contest searching for an “Organic Idol” who would serve as an ambassador and spokesperson on behalf of organic products: an organic superhero.

Rodale’s indomitable magazine, Organic Gardening, maintained that it was still leading “the charge toward a sustainable future.” Consumer sensitivity to food safety, distaste for the corporate “foodopoly,” and trepidation about genetically modified crops were among the motivations that kept spurring even more growth in the organic industry. At the same time, misapprehensions about compost lingered, prickly questions about allowable substances were unresolved, and confusion about exactly what “organic” meant remained. Organic farmers were still outliers, if not outcasts. Some detractors thought organic food was no better—and perhaps even worse—than conventional food. The organic label was assaulted as a wanton marketing scam and condemned as extravagantly elitist. Popularity itself was a double-edged ballast. Cynics alleged that agribusinesses seeking to profit from an ambience of haute health food had hijacked the incandescent movement.

American Organic analyzes the history and significance of organics as a cultural movement in the United States. It illuminates how organic production and consumption are entrenched in the lives of all Americans, whether they eat organic food or not. It pays special attention to the durability of early publications that have been intertwined with social changes as they influenced the movement. Rodale’s goal was improving individuals and the world, but the organic movement has been more successful in meeting the first objective than the second. From agricultural pioneers in the 1940s to
hippies in the 1960s to consumer activists today, the organic movement has preserved connections to environmentalism, agrarianism, and nutritional dogma. Organic growing and consumption have been everything from a practical decision, a lifestyle choice, and a status marker to a political deed, a subversive effort, and a social philosophy. The organic movement has exhibited split personalities, alternating between highfalutin or down to earth. The movement’s complex messages have been manifested in the trifecta of growing, buying, and eating organic food. *American Organic* embraces that multiplicity and expounds on the nuances of what the organic zeitgeist has meant in American culture. I do not tell the reader what to eat, nor do I state whether organics are “good” or “bad.” My holistic approach examines intersections between farmers, gardeners, consumers, government regulations, food shopping venues, advertisements, books, grassroots groups, and megaindustries involved in all echelons of the organic food movement.

The first four chapters are arranged chronologically, but the sequences of events are not strictly linear within each. Overlapping themes reappear in each chapter. Chapter 1 examines the work of Jerome Irving (J. I.) Rodale, a foundational figure in the organic canon. Rodale zealously popularized organic agriculture in the United States through his books, magazines, and research sponsored by Rodale Press. The chapter looks at his role as an organic envoy and investigates his work in a cultural context, from the 1940s into the 1950s. It considers the contrast between the budding organic movement and government-supported conventional agriculture during the chemical boom. The second chapter focuses on the 1960s and early 1970s, taking account of organic farming’s prevalence among environmentalists, homesteaders, the counterculture, and antiestablishment converts. It delves into the culturally resonant ideals of country life, family farms, and agrarianism featured in organic texts. It also situates the pursuit of physical well-being through organic food within broader American inclinations toward health food. Chapter 3 highlights the late 1970s and 1980s, the ongoing health and environmental traits of the organic movement, food safety concerns, the continuing activities of Rodale Press, and new organic business ventures. The fourth chapter picks up in the 1990s, with federal organic legislation, statutory impediments, the spectacular intensification of the industry, corporate power plays, fissures between devotees, and the repercussions of all those developments. It traces how the organic movement’s ostensibly subversive impetus became more routinized and less insurrectionary. Chapter 5 focuses on organics as a health food movement and the interconnected issues of chemicals, GMOs,
Cascadian Farm (Photo courtesy of Lisa Powell)
“junk” food, and food scares. The last chapter inspects organic food consumption, including shopping landscapes, gentrification, “green” consumerism, and identity construction through purchases. It discusses the acclaim that has bolstered organic revenues and the skepticism that has plagued the organic food clan.

**SCHOLARLY ENGAGEMENTS**

By examining the organic movement in an interdisciplinary fashion, I engage with several branches of scholarship, including environmental history, consumer studies, and food studies. These intertwined areas of inquiry have seen modifications and new angles in recent years. *American Organic* contributes to the existing literature in these fields, transcends methodological limits by considering them in tandem, and makes fresh critical interventions by presenting a more complete understanding of how the environment, consumers, and food are inextricable. It is impossible to study organics without this multidimensional strategy.

The first major subject, environmental history, contemplates the reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment by charting physical nature itself, the human socioeconomic sphere, and the intellectual domain. Environmental history unites history, economics, geography, ecology, politics, and cultural studies in meaningful dialogue about the profound effects humans and the natural world have wrought upon each other. Environmental historians have examined topics such as the biological magnitude of colonization, the cultural causes of natural disasters, the ecological results of industrialization, and the varying definitions of nature. The environment has been a structuring agent that constrains options for human activities. At the same time, human biases, preconceptions, morals, and laws have impinged on physical places. Since the 1980s, environmental historians have engaged in copious deliberations about the denotations and connotations of “nature.” Historian William Cronon spearheaded a corpus of scholarship that clarified links between city and country, placing the “hinterlands” in a metropolitan perspective and divulging how market forces were also prevailing over environmental forces. Cronon also asserted that the very idea of “wilderness” was a human concoction, not an essentialist category, and rejected the fundamental dualism placing urban industrialism in opposition to rural nature.
Americans have long contended that nature was an asylum from hectic urban-industrial life and preferred not to unravel the knotty web strung between those concepts. However, challenges to the romantic tradition that artificially separated ideal, sublime nature from corrupt, human culture have become de rigueur in environmental history. Nature and culture are intimately enmeshed, since even “untouched” natural panoramas have a human history. Poststructuralist philosophy has interrogated the strict dichotomy between nature and culture. Many environmental scholars have addressed the conjoined boundaries of the human and nonhuman and of nature and culture. Cultural geographer David Harvey has dissented from nature “fetishization” or “idolatry,” insisting that unspoiled nature had to be saved from human damage. Other scholars have emphasized the fluidity of categories like “natural” and “artificial.” Greater recognition of nature-culture hybrids has developed in environmental history, exposing the natural or wild elements of cities and the human histories of “pristine” landscapes. These approaches suggest how the human relationship with the environment might be reinvented to incorporate a more calibrated view of nature and culture.

_American Organic_ complements previous literature in environmental history by scrutinizing the mélange of the natural and the human that organic gardens and farms encompass. My work recognizes the environment as a historical actor while also acknowledging the material consequences of human behavior. Globally, agriculture has tremendous ecological and social aftereffects. _American Organic_ demonstrates how the very word “organic” has united growers, consumers, businesses, and mass media—and how it has divided them. It grapples with the quandary of what kind of agriculture can best reduce carbon emissions, increase biodiversity, improve human health, and still “feed the world.”

Consumer studies, the second area of analysis, considers commodities, consumers themselves, and social corollaries of consumption. Economists, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have all contributed to consumer studies. In appraising the capitalist system, Karl Marx described the “commodity fetishism” that arises when money instead of labor power is bestowed the value of a commodity. Thorstein Veblen’s _The Theory of the Leisure Class_ (1899) drew attention to “conspicuous consumption,” denigrating people who used goods to signal their status. Subsequent scholars were less judgmental but still underlined the symbolic character of consumer goods. Jean Baudrillard’s _The System of Objects_ (1968) defined consumption as an active relationship that operated as the foundation of our entire cultural sys-
tem and consisted of the “systematic manipulation of signs.” In *The World of Goods* (1979), Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood analyzed consumption from an anthropological bent, as part of the social system. They asserted that goods were neutral, but their roles were social. Consumption was a way of using goods to make judgments and classifications visible. Douglas and Isherwood saw goods as an information system, endowed with value by fellow consumers, and they disputed the notion of a “puppet consumer” manipulated by wily advertisers. Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) similarly examined the “tactics” of consumption that individuals employed to appropriate and personalize products of mass culture. Consumption was another form of production, revealed through what de Certeau called “ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.” He believed that tactics of consumption were ingenious techniques of lending “a political dimension to everyday practices.” Expanding on the politics of consumption, historian Susan Strasser’s *Satisfaction Guaranteed* (1989) explored the creation of powerful mass markets for manufactured goods but maintained an emphasis on consumer agency.

Sociologists and economists have studied how consumption and class position were connected. Pierre Bourdieu thought that each class fraction had a system of dispositions, or an “internalized form of class conditioning,” known as *habitus*. One’s *habitus* generated particular practices and thoughts. People and classes distinguished themselves by their cumulative aesthetic preferences, which constituted a lifestyle. Consumer choices were attempts to acquire cultural capital, which defined class membership and served as an instrument of power. Historians have examined evolving attitudes toward consumer culture and American character, shifts in aesthetics and design, and technological transformations. Additional work has analyzed the expressive function of consumer decisions, the implications of choice on personal satisfaction, and the social psychology of shopping. Much work has noted the importance of advertising and branding. Surveys and market researchers have shown a hierarchy of assorted motives as factors in consumption decisions. Scholars have discussed how some consumers have viewed shopping as activism, while others have been acting only on a singular level. In mainstream media, anticonsumerist texts have urged people to reduce material possessions, while proponents of “responsible consumption” have encouraged people to buy “eco-conscious” goods in order to help “change the world.” Keener attention to resource use, commodity chains, and the externalities of consumption has been a key development in
the field. My work contributes to this body of literature by demonstrating the dynamic disposition of organic consumption, the utilitarian and performative functions of organic food, the motivations for purchasing and the values consumers have assigned to it, differences between sites of consumption, the larger cultural systems in which consumption takes place, and linkages between production, marketing, and procurement.

The third thematic strand, food studies, looks beyond the dominions of cooking and nutrition to examine food practices, systems, cultures, symbolism, material artifacts, folklore, literature, and social relations. Blossoming scholarship in food studies includes work by anthropologists, sociologists, food historians, and geographers who use ethnographic, quantitative, and qualitative methods. One of the earliest paradigms for food studies was a structuralist approach. Roland Barthes analyzed the “grammar of foods,” in which food was a sign, a system of communication, a body of images, and a protocol of behavior. Anthropological studies of food practices have underscored how food is employed in symbolic, materialist, and economic ways. Many scholars have assessed how food serves as a signifier of the social environment, and their work has shed light on how food is alternatively a badge of identity, an apparatus of power, and a symbol of resistance.

The culturalist angle to food studies has explored subjective experiences, social cognition, and historical trends. Several works have examined how national cuisines have been shaped by geography, subsistence needs, environmental factors, cultural taboos, technological developments, immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. Scholars note that foodways are entangled with gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and class. Despite fears that have been voiced about homogeneity in a globalized marketplace, some work has emphasized that the rise of mass-produced food and international chain restaurants didn’t occasion culinary uniformity. Many historians have spotlighted particular foodstuffs, prepared foods, and food rituals. Others have delineated the commodity chains that connect disparate locales and bring goods “from farm to table” in the industrial food infrastructure.

Media attention to food sustainability has grown exponentially, and journalists like Eric Schlosser, Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, and Mark Bittman have produced best-selling books on food safety, the politics of food, and the health repercussions of dietary choices. American Organic builds on scholarly attentiveness to the assembly of meanings and identities through food. It explores organic food as a nexus of concerns about health, ethics, taste, prestige, purity, and authenticity. My research notes parallels between
the organic movement and other food networks that highlight cause-driven consumption, such as vegetarianism, local food, slow food, and fair trade.

Overall, my research combines perspectives from the interrelated disciplines of environmental history, consumer studies, and food studies, providing an expansive assessment of the organic movement. Much that is written about organics has a narrow slant: there are case studies of businesses, ethnographies that track specific organic farms, and consumer guides to organic shopping. Unlike these, *American Organic* presents a new critical paradigm and offers a discerning vantage point. My study entails the collection and scrutiny of historical and contemporary data, including archival, regulatory, literary, and promotional documents. It applies discourse analysis, semiotics, iconographic study, and cultural hermeneutics to exemplary texts and historicizes them. Observations of organic sites of consumption also enhance the historical and theoretical evaluations. Although organic agriculture is an international phenomenon, with cross-cultural exchange between nations, my investigation concentrates on the United States. This study contributes to ongoing debates over sustainable agriculture, green consumption, nutrition and health, identity formation, and popular constructions of nature. It informs explorations of the dialectic between cultural production and consumer agency. The result is relevant to academics as well as to the general public, since it casts the organic movement alongside wide-ranging environmental, economic, cultural, ethical, scientific, and historical issues on the American stage.

**ORGANICS AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

Organic farming has been classified as a mere hobby, as an indulgent luxury, and as a minor constituent of agribusiness; organic food has been dubbed a hollow preference and an exploited industry sector. Fundamentally, though, I argue that organic farmers and eaters are part of a social movement with a vibrant group identity. Sociologist Alberto Melucci defined a social movement as collective action that involved solidarity, was engaged in conflict, and broke systemic limits; actors recognized that they were part of a “single social unit.” The organic movement does have its own history of solidarity, conflict, and violation of boundaries. However, a movement is a transitory network of interaction among individuals and organizations, not a permanent monolith of robots acting in unison. Its personality is mobile and
fragmented, not fixed or unified. The organic movement often reinvented itself while adapting to changing circumstances. Internal tension sometimes boiled over, affecting the movement’s configuration. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall noted that identities are always “in process,” never completed. They are constructed by enunciative strategies marking difference and exclusion. \[35\]

Though it has never been static, the organic movement did indeed maintain distinct characteristics. It coalesced through core maxims that provided internal guidance. This ideology also offered an “official” view of the movement to society at large. \[36\]

Social movements begin when contrasting value systems come into conflict, and one group makes a meaningful attempt to alter existing norms. In promoting or opposing social change, a social movement tends to fluctuate between phases of intensity and latency. \[37\] Over time, radical aims may give way to moderate ones, and successes may trigger backlashes. This is very much the story of organics. Organics can be categorized as one of several contemporary new social movements, which differ from models of earlier mass social movements in their emphasis on consumption. Many of these collective initiatives deal with nonpolitical terrain, focusing instead on “self-realization” in daily life. \[38\] The organic movement has often been more personal than political, but it has continued to partake in its own cultural conflicts. While the commercial organic food industry has become a salient component of the movement’s structure, the organic movement as a whole has maintained a rank-and-file base and a social agenda. \[39\]

Organic movement participants have been engrossed in a series of differentiated acts against antiorganic opponents, which have reinforced their sense of belonging. \[40\] While acting as a social movement in this respect, the organic legion could also be described as a community. Social anthropologist Anthony Cohen noted that a community was largely a mental construct, something people made into “a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.” \[41\] The community of organic farmers and consumers lacked homogeny, yet it crystallized through communal consciousness. There was infighting but also cohesion. Organic community members simultaneously belonged to other associations. Still, they did form a cadre of people who shared actions and symbols, however malleable these might have been, that significantly distinguished them. \[42\]

While decoding the organic movement, I have interpreted books, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, catalogues, websites, blogs, podcasts, regulatory documents, and other discursive sources. In the missives heralded
by organic emissaries, I have found coherent anchors and common themes. Dominant discourses about organics have impinged on public consciousness, and some dictums have gained precedence over others. There have been battles between master narratives and alternative dialects in the organic psyche. Social movements are polyphonic, churning contradictory voices and subtexts within every utterance. Semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualized every text as a dialogue, in which compound discourses interacted. Like texts, movements rarely speak as univocal entities; they are dialogically oriented. Not all actors participate equally or fully in the articulation of movement identity. While the organic movement has had no single or conclusive precept, some notable players have spoken vociferously. Certain “movement intellectuals” have been more visible and legible as organizers, spokespeople, or visionaries.  

American Organic includes analyses of rhetorical strategies utilized by organic farmers, business leaders, chefs, consumers, writers, organizations, and stakeholders who have engaged extensively with the “organic lifestyle” and served as attachés. Unraveling the controlling organic discourses provides insight into the movement’s epicenter. Some prominent trailblazers on the organic front lines consciously aligned with discernible viewpoints. American Organic interrogates the manifestations of these resilient ideals to reveal pivotal tenets of the movement.
WHAT IS “ORGANIC” ANYWAY?

Since the 1940s, the concepts of holism, health, natural cycles, and balance have been integral to the organic ethos. Organic farming was predicated on approaching the soil as a living organism and using nonsynthetic materials to build fertility. At a time when the chemically based approach prevailed, the organic ambassador, J. I. Rodale, felt that the organic method was a way of “bringing nature back into balance.” Addressing doubts about what “organically grown” really meant, he defined it in 1953 as food and crops that had been “raised on soil fertilized by organic methods only.” In particular, he said the term indicated that “no chemical fertilizers, conditioners, insecticides or any such type of spray, pesticide or preservative has been used at any time in the growing or preparation of these products.” “Organic” was delineated as both an oppositional and a positive label; it was anticonventional and pronatural. Rodale’s definition was never legally sanctioned; he and other organic diplomats modified it repeatedly. I argue that organic protocol was dynamic, evolving to accommodate new research and practices. In this respect, it was suited to longevity. However, the meaning of the term “organic” was fuzzy for decades, and the discourses surrounding “organic” have shifted, conveying fluid connotations to successive eras. This opacity has thrown off consumers unfamiliar with organic standards. The individualization of responsibility has been the movement’s primary tactic. Still, elements of subversiveness have always been part of the movement.

The organic movement was (and is) in perpetual flux, molded by social and historical contexts. Still, amid the breadth of doctrines motivating organic gardeners and farmers, common threads recurred. Persistent tropes offered by organic advisers included the poetic veneration of primitive “Nature”; a yearning for “wholeness” and simplicity; the hunt for independence, sustainability, plentiful harvests, and abundant health; antiurban sentiments; celebrations of idyllic agrarianism and earthy pastoralism; the assertion of a purpose higher than a paycheck; and a respect for honest, wholesome hard work. Organic iconography has relied extensively on illustrations of backyard gardens, charming family farms, peaceful natural vistas, and sustainable “green” lifestyles. These visual organic emblems are significant because landscape representations found in popular culture bear metaphorical importance. Discursive analysis indicates how organic farmers have long resolved to work in “harmony with nature,” and grandiloquent descriptions on organic labels have mimicked this leitmotif.
When J. I. Rodale championed the term “organic” as indicating a fundamental farming practice imitating the “balance of nature,” he implied that this symbiosis was in stark contrast to the domineering means of corporate agriculture. Rodale maintained that organics called for “a study of the phenomena of Nature,” so that it would “not depart too far from her methods.”46 An *Organic Gardening* article in 1952 said that every organic gardener knew that “the balance of nature must not be overlooked.”47 Another organic farmer in 1954 discussed his aspiration to “raise in Nature’s own way the kind of food required for our well-being.”48 Much later, in *The Organic Garden Book* (1993), Geoff Hamilton pronounced that organic gardening was still “simply a way of working with nature rather than against it”; basic organic cultivation principles followed “those found in the natural world.”49 Contemporary organic farming expert Eliot Coleman said that true organic farmers understood how “nature’s elegantly structured system” had to be “studied and nurtured.”50 Diverse templates of knowledge among organic missionaries have coexisted, and “nature” has had a range of meanings for participants. Nonetheless, descriptive literature, attitudes about the environment, and guiding moralities such as “cooperating with nature” have affected how organic farming has been performed and perceived. Furthermore, J. I. Rodale
epitomizes the mercurial movement and the shift from organic farming to organic consumerism that has occurred in the past eighty years. Whether you love him or hate him, Rodale and his descendants have played, and continue to play, a vital role in the US organic movement.

The way people have understood “organic” as a cultural designation has often differed from what has become a stringent legal definition. There were contentious struggles over pinning down precisely what the pillars of organic agriculture were. Notwithstanding habitual claims that organics were the way farming had “always” been done, it was actually a new, discrete technique advanced by Rodale and other pioneers. Organic practitioners deliberately crafted their game plan. Though some of its methods were centuries old, organic farming was also innovative in its incorporation of unique features. In the United States, it was not until 1990 that the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) established national parameters for marketing organic agricultural products. This culminating legislation assured consumers that organically produced goods met a consistent standard. Items that had long been tinged with an aura of virtue acquired administrative approbation. By 2001, the National Organic Program (NOP) rules were finalized, providing national criteria for the term “certified organic.” Any person or retailer who misappropriated the term “organic” became subject to a penalty of up to $10,000.

Federal organic standards developed by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) went into full effect on October 21, 2002. Only certified organic products containing at least 95 percent organic content could be labeled “organic” on the primary label panel and carry the USDA seal. Those with at least 70 percent organic ingredients could read “made with organic ingredients” but not bear the seal. To warrant certification, organic farms had to prove that they omitted certain customs and adopted others. From that point on, all the intricate details were revised as new disputes arose. The recognizable USDA Organic seal was a process claim, not a product assertion; it referred to how the merchandise was made, not what it promised to do. The formal classification was forged, in part, to dispel mystification about organics. The seal’s trustworthiness was crucial to the success—and profits—of organic food sales. However, quarrels about which modus operandi warrants the seal have affected the praxis of organic growers.

Jeremiads applying the “conventionalization thesis” to organic farming have lamented that the growth of organic food from a small niche into a multibillion-dollar global industry insinuates that there has been corporate
co-optation. It has seemed that the movement’s linchpin ideals have dissipated into profiteering. Critics have alleged that, by “selling out,” organics have moved from the moral high ground to the crass bargain basement. The transition from grassroots nirvana to mainstream nightmare has been well publicized in declensionist story lines, which have often made facile suppositions. There are fractures in the spectrum of categorizations between large, disingenuous, and hollow organics and small, sincere, and meaningful organics. Finger-wagging decriers of organic food’s metamorphosis often ignore how motifs ingrained in organic rhetoric have, since their inception, reconciled the movement to the orthodox food framework. The movement grappled with the drawbacks and advantages of obliging the commercial market for decades. I argue that the organic fraternity in the United States was never as wholly radical or seditious as some votaries profess. Organic farmers were not raising citizen armies to supplant conventional agriculture; rather, they developed stand-ins for the chemical model. Organic consumers “voted” with their dollars but did not overhaul the entire regime, however much they detested it. This book analyzes the tension between subcultural and mainstream facets in the organic movement since the 1940s. No true revolution ever took place, but some sects within the organic movement continue to clamor for one.

At times, organic farming has indeed posed a formidable challenge to conventional farming’s axes of power. For the most part, though, organivores have banked on nonconfrontational language, indirect protests, and individualized responsibility. They have demonstrated the pleasant—often intangible—benefits accruing to those who engage in organic activities. The underlying motivations of people doting on organics have included the improvement of physical health, personal fulfillment, and the achievement of internal purity. Those growing and consuming organic food have pragmatically expressed displeasure with pesticides through defensive self-protection. Some organicists have had lofty goals to change the world but pursued these through a quest for private satisfaction. Despite the periodic theme of “revolution,” these acts have often been limited ripostes. Consumers were expected to assume the individual “burden” of purchasing organics. Backyard gardening and routine shopping decisions were less effective than other kinds of activism could have been, such as large-scale political lobbying demanding greater legislative reform, which could have pressured “the establishment” and facilitated the enlargement of organic agriculture. Chronic dependence on the behavior of individuals restricted the organic movement’s capacity for
comprehensive social insurgency. Individuals purchasing organic food have rarely campaigned intensely for an overhaul of the mainstay assumptions underpinning conventional agriculture. Organic farmers did not raise their fists to overthrow the chemical industry. Yet, even as autonomous organic businesses succumbed to corporate mergers and the ringing cash registers of Wal-Mart, the movement retained transgressive ingredients.

The insights in *American Organic* matter to those who eat organic food—and those who don’t. They matter to those who buy Martha Stewart Living 100 percent organic herb and vegetable seeds for their window boxes—and those who buy Roundup Weed & Grass Killer to spray their tomatoes. This book does not attempt to judge or to sway you. I do not tell the reader what to eat or whether organics are unabashedly good or bad. I am a historian, not a demagogue. Plenty of partisan publications have weighed in, but few have carefully pondered the organic movement’s trajectory. The term “organic” has often been malleable enough to be pulled and twisted by rival factions, leaving a trail of misconceptions. Its elements were ideologically charged. My research unmasks planes of contention and complacency, resistance and accommodation. The organic movement’s interdependent creeds have had a formative influence on its status and stupendous growth in American culture. The lived experiences of farmers, the convictions of consumers, the semantics of promoters, and the undertones of disparagers have been insep-arable in steering how the movement has been branded and encountered. *American Organic* traces that history and chronicles how competing, oppo-sitional axioms have affected the daily conundrum of “what should I eat . . . and why does it matter?”