

CHAPTER 8

Fields of Knowledge*

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Organic food is becoming increasingly popular in Ireland, as it is elsewhere. In September 2004, the Minister for Horticulture and Food, Noel Treacy, launched a *Guide to Organic Food and Farming* at the farmers' market in Galway city. Speaking at the launch, Minister Treacy commented that 'while consumers have a generally positive view of organic food and what it represents, they often find it difficult to make an informed decision on what to buy because they don't feel they have enough information'. The new guide was developed to address this information deficit by informing consumers about organic food and farming, how to recognise it and where they can get it.¹ Organic food is now sold, not only in specialised outlets such as health food stores, but also by all the major food chains in the country. However, while consumption of organic food is increasing, there has been no

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¹ 'Minister Treacy Urges Consumers to Try Organic', www.agriculture.gov.ie/printindex.jsp?file=pressrel/2004/133-2004.xml, accessed 4 October 2005.

corresponding shift to organic production by conventional Irish farmers.

Organic farming in Ireland still accounts for less than 2 per cent of total agricultural land. As a result, most of the organic food on sale in Ireland is actually imported. This chapter focuses on the theme of knowledge, and how it is produced and disseminated among Irish organic food producers and consumers. The diffusion of knowledge about organic production has been hampered by the dominance of scientific knowledge associated with conventional food production, which has acted as a major barrier to conversion from conventional farming methods. Organic farming offers an alternative and potentially more sustainable body of knowledge and set of expertises for managing food production. The differences between these two forms of knowledge come into sharp relief against the backdrop of environmental, social and economic problems associated with the dominant food system. Scientific knowledge, as applied to conventional agriculture, has been held to account for damage to both natural and human health. The knowledge base that supports organic farming emphasises sustainability in food production and offers to empower both producers and consumers of food. The institutionalisation of this alternative knowledge, however, means that the ideas and practices of the organic movement are increasingly being incorporated into the very system to which the movement was originally opposed.

Organic farming as an alternative to conventional farming

On a Sunday afternoon in June 2004, a group of people met on an organic farm in County Kildare. They were there to hold a party. The location was a horticultural holding, producing vegetables and eggs that are sold at the farm and at a stall at a weekly market in Dublin. The event was by invitation and by word of mouth. To find the farm, people had to follow handwritten signs and balloons down increasingly narrow roads, as if on a quest for a magical

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place, a Utopia. Those attending were the customers, colleagues and friends of the organic producers who live and work on the farm. They ranged from urban organic consumers with no previous experience of how food is produced to people who grow their own vegetables in their gardens or allotments. Some were highly environmentally aware and had engaged in practices similar to those of the organic farmers, such as the female who said she composts her waste on the balcony of her Dublin apartment. Several professional organic producers had also made the journey.

After this mixed group of people had finished eating, the farmers brought them around the farm. The small group passed through the fields where vegetables were grown, visited the chicken huts, walked under the windmill that supplies the farm with electricity, and passed the reed bed system that the family use for cleaning their waste water. It was a sunny, breezy day, and all around were the scents of pollen and the smell of manure. They watched the chickens scratch and bathe in the dust and they listened to insects buzzing around the flowering herbs. As they entered the greenhouses, they were met by waves of heat. At the compost heap, the farmer dug out a handful of worms, albeit to a rather mixed response from those standing closest to him. In this way, urban consumers were able to see, feel, hear and touch the processes by which the food they would eat later that summer was being produced. And other organic producers could experience first hand the daily work of their colleagues. Here we see that a particular form of knowledge is being produced and disseminated to producers and consumers alike.

In recent years, sociologists and geographers have begun to pay attention to the forms of knowledge in alternative food production. The many predicaments associated with the modern, intensive food industry are well documented. Industrialised food production has been associated with both natural damage and with danger to human health. It is also linked to social injustice, transferring as it does power to agrifood corporations and chemical manufacturers

and away from both producers and consumers.² Rural sociologists contributing to the advancement of sustainable development have recognised that different, sometimes conflicting, forms of knowledge about the environment exist. Knowledge that is ingrained in local, indigenous agricultural traditions is increasingly perceived to have the potential to create more sustainable forms of food production and to protect the local environment. Such forms of knowledge arise from an intimate relationship with the local natural world, the local conditions and species. This knowledge is reflected in farming practices that have developed in such a way that they avoid over-exploiting the local environment.³ The knowledge required to engage in organic farming is seen as one solution to the pressing issue of sustainability. Indeed, social geographers Kevin Morgan and Jonathan Murdoch have suggested that forms of knowledge and learning in the organic system may empower farmers to a greater degree than forms of knowledge in conventional farming.⁴

From tacit to codified knowledge and back again

Morgan and Murdoch outline three different systems of farming, which they argue are characterised by different ways of knowing, and which we can relate to the Irish context. The dominant form of knowledge employed in farming before the introduction of chemicals such as pesticides and artificial fertilisers into agriculture, was a

² P. McMichael, 'The Power of Food', *Agriculture and Human Values*, vol. 17, 2000, pp. 21–33.

³ The example most often used is that of non-Western native peoples, although some commentators have pointed out that not all indigenous knowledge and practices are sustainable. See J. Murdoch and J. Clark, 'Sustainable Knowledge', *Geoforum*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1994, pp. 115–132.

⁴ K. Morgan and J. Murdoch, 'Organic vs. Conventional Agriculture: Knowledge, Power and Innovation in the Food Chain', *Geoforum*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2000, pp. 159–173.

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‘tacit’ way of understanding the operation of one’s family farm. This type of knowledge was local, and it developed over generations through the practical experience of working with the soil and animals. Such tacit local knowledge could not be explained or understood through words alone, but had to be demonstrated in practice. It applied only to the specific place where it had been developed, and it made sense as part of a wider understanding of one’s relationship to one’s land holdings. These kinds of traditional farming practices were disrupted by the chemical revolution, which rendered methods developed to suit specific locations redundant.

Scientists and experts turned their attention to agriculture. Chemicals could be applied universally, regardless of local soil or climate conditions. The local, tacit forms of knowing were replaced by what Morgan and Murdoch call a ‘codified’ form of knowledge. This is a form of knowledge, developed by scientists, which requires translation into simple instructions for lay people to act upon it. Such scientific knowledge, and the rules arising from it, can be applied to agricultural land and practice anywhere. In fact, this process changed not only what people knew but, more importantly, how they learned. Instead of acting on a holistic understanding of their particular land holding, people came to rely on instructions from scientific experts. Knowledge developed contextually and shared locally was replaced by universal instructions.

Morgan and Murdoch believe that the more recent system of innovation and knowledge diffusion within organic farming represents a break with the kind of knowledge associated with the industrialisation of the food chain. They suggest that organic farming provides better opportunities for using and sharing tacit local knowledge. Organic techniques, they point out, were not developed by scientists and then diffused through the state services, as is usually the case. Instead, they were developed by environmentalists, and only at a later stage were they taken up by the scientific establishment. Morgan and Murdoch believe that

conventional farmers who convert to organic practices become involved in new relationships in which they can learn from other farmers, rather than relying on expert advisors. No longer passive receivers of instructions from state experts, they become active agents in the process of food production.

Farm walks, or open days on organic farms, are examples of organic knowledge distribution in practice. The farmers hosting a walk take on the role of expert, in that they lead their visitors around the farm, telling them where to go and where not to go, explaining their farming methods and how they arrived at them. The knowledge they seek to pass on is most frequently derived from their own experimentation. This is what gives them the status of expert. On walks such as the one described above, organic farmers serve as models, they inspire their visitors. They tend not to give specific instructions. Instead, they are often keen to stress that 'what works for us may not work for you'. In other words, unlike scientific experts, they do not claim to have access to a universal truth. Indeed, during farm walks people tend to engage in dialogue, discussing the issues raised, and exchanging their own knowledge and experience. In this way, on organic farm walks no-one is passive, people are actively encouraged to ask questions and comment on what they have seen. They become part of a pool of expertise, where each member acts as an expert in his or her own right. This form of knowledge sharing, which is deployed through practical demonstrations and dialogue among people with different experiences, is resonant of the tacit knowledge tradition which Morgan and Murdoch claim existed before the introduction of chemicals into farming.

In one important respect, the contemporary organic knowledge system differs from the tacit knowledge of traditional farmers because organic farmers, unlike their predecessors, are acutely aware of scientific advances. Crucially though, they deploy this knowledge in a different way. Organic farm walks are a useful illustration of how the organic movement can mobilise to challenge the top-down

model of knowledge diffusion that characterises modern conventional agriculture.

State-sponsored organic farming

The development in organic farming of an alternative agricultural knowledge, and the resulting practices and techniques, have been so successful that the state and the scientific community have taken note. The institutionalisation of the organic movement has begun.⁵ This means that the ideas and practices associated with the organic movement are being incorporated into the state system to which the movement was originally opposed. Some analysts argue that social movements should promote the incorporation of alternative knowledge into state structures. The state's take up of the ideas of the green movement, for example, has brought about at least some of the changes in both policy and practice that were among environmentalists' original aims.⁶ The organic organisations, IOFGA (The Irish Organic Farmers' and Growers' Association), Organic Trust and Demeter, are now employed by the state to certify and inspect organic farmers on its behalf. These organisations are also represented on the Organic Market Development Group, chaired by Bord Bia, which produced the new consumer guide to organic food. Organic has become an 'owned' word, and producers can only apply this label to their food if they are fee-paying members of one of the accrediting organisations.

Teagasc, the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority, has undertaken to produce scientific knowledge about organic methods and to provide education for potential and existing organic farmers. An Organic

⁵ H. Tovey, "Messers, Visionaries and Organobureaucrats": Dilemmas of Institutionalisation in the Irish Organic Farming Movement', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 9, 1999, pp. 31–59.

⁶ R. Eyerman and A. Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

Research and Development Advisory Committee has been established, as well as a research centre at Johnstown Castle, County Wexford, which has carried out extensive trials on organic meat, cereals and milk. In 2004, Teagasc took over from the organic organisations as the organiser of a national series of organic farm walks. As we shall see, walking the land in the guided company of a Teagasc expert is a rather different experience than walking it with the organic farmer. Tacit knowledge, so valued by the farmers who are in touch with their land and their locale, is now re-packaged and (re)presented by the expert as codified knowledge.

Large printed posters advertising a 'Teagasc Event' rather than colourful balloons, directed interested parties to another farm walk which took place in the summer of 2004 on a similar horticultural farm to the one in County Kildare, but this time in County Wicklow. The occasion was one in a series of open days on organic farms organised by Teagasc. The farms were chosen by a Teagasc sub-group on development, research and training, which sent out a call to organic farmers who might be interested in taking part. The applications received went through a screening process, twenty farms were visited and eventually six were chosen for the organic walks, each representing a different agricultural focus such as beef, tillage or horticulture.

The Wicklow walk was advertised in both conventional and organic farming publications. It was attended by non-farmers hoping to set up organic vegetable-growing businesses, existing organic farmers and conventional farmers considering conversion to organic. On this walk, the hosts and the visitors again shared experiences and expertise. However, there were other experts present, in the form of several Teagasc officials. Such officials are experts in the theory of organic farming and on the rules and regulations governing organics. Throughout the walk, as the Teagasc officials spoke to the visitors, giving them advice on the options for becoming organic farmers, they spoke less of their own experiences and more about the organic farmers

whose land they were visiting. They seemed to use this farming couple, their everyday lives and daily work, as an 'illustrative case' to which they could refer. The couple served as an example of a different approach to growing, tending to and selling vegetables. The state agents could explain the methods used by the couple in terms of organic regulations. By objectifying the organic farmers in this way, by distancing themselves from the physical labour of organic production, the Teagasc officials could reinforce their own status as experts. They assumed the role of interpreter, translating the methods and the philosophy of organic food production in terms of fairly simple rules and regulations. In this way, tacit knowledge was once again codified. Although encouraging organic conversions, state agents still seem to be caught up in the system of knowledge transfer in which their role is more one of giving instructions than one of encouraging experimentation or dialogue among farmers and other interested parties.⁷

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, organic farmers are producers not just of food, but also of knowledge, which they extract, debate and develop on an ongoing basis. Through practices such as farm walks, they pass on this knowledge to each other and to consumers. Organic farmers are aware of and draw on scientific advancements as well as their own locally derived knowledge. However, the way information is passed on within the organic movement differs greatly from the

⁷ Hilary Tovey has demonstrated that in the process of channelling financial aid to organic farmers, the Irish state also manages to repress the ideological aspects of organic farming as a critique of the conventional food systems by defining it as a conservation practice rather than recognising it as an alternative food economy. See H. Tovey, 'Food, Environmentalism and Rural Sociology: On the Organic Farming Movement in Ireland', *Sociologia Ruralis*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1997, pp. 21–37.

knowledge diffusion methods employed in the conventional food system. Morgan and Murdoch conclude that organic farming re-values 'local knowledge, local eco-systems and local identities so that farmers can once again become "knowing agents"',⁸ able to exercise more autonomy and control over both their relations with other actors in the food chain and the methods employed on their farms. This, in turn, can lead to more sustainable knowledge and practices.

The two walks discussed in this chapter illustrate two very different approaches to teaching the practices of organic farming. One promotes tacit ways of demonstrating skills and ideas through dialogue and debate among active participants who recognise each other's expertise. The other is in effect the institutionalisation of tacit organic knowledge, transforming it into a codified form, in this case rules and instructions, for which one has to turn to an expert. When the state takes over the responsibility of passing on knowledge about organic production to interested individuals, it has the potential to reach a greater number of people than the organic movement could, but it reverses the system of knowledge transfer, thereby disempowering organic farmers rather than empowering them. The danger is that local knowledge, with its potential for sustainability, is silenced in this process.

⁸ K. Morgan and J. Murdoch, 'Organic vs. Conventional Agriculture: Knowledge, Power and Innovation in the Food Chain', *Geoforum*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2000, pp. 159–173, p. 170.



