

# BOOK REVIEW

---

## Matthew Reed: *Rebels for the soil: The rise of the global organic food and farming movement*

*Earthscan Ltd., London (2010); ISBN 978-1-84407-597-3.*

Organic farming today, which is given a lot of attention by social researchers, represents the most dynamic of all agricultural sectors. However, a better understanding of its development is hindered by the fragmented focus of research on this phenomenon and the various cultural and historical settings in which this research takes place. The recently published *Rebels for the Soil* by Matthew Reed offers the contextual information necessary to adequately fill this gap.

*Rebels for the Soil* analyses the developments in the organic movement from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the present time. The purpose of this informative and perceptive book is to offer an insight into the basis of the organic ideology from which organic farming and the concept of organic food has arisen. Reed's analysis strongly accentuates the interwoven cultural, economic and political relationships, thereby facilitating a better comprehension of organic agriculture and organic food in the late modern society.

The main focus of the work is the organic movement. This is conceptualised as a cultural movement with a global reach, focused on the complex issues of agriculture and food; its form, organisation, strategy and arguments have changed with time, but they have always stemmed from a common ground – the efforts to change the way in which the society regards agriculture. The best known representation of the movement's ideas – and also its greatest success – is the production of certified organic food. Organic quality generally raises many positive expectations, which are derived from the values of the organic movement. In order to explain “how did it happen, how specifically did organic achieve that status in people's lives” (p. 14), the author investigates the main actors of the movement, their ideas and the circumstances, which have together contributed to the realisation of the movement's goals.

The historical account follows a synchronic as well as diachronic approach with the focus on Anglo-

Saxon countries, namely the UK and the USA. The periodisation of the movement draws on the identified changes in culture with regard to the evolution of the social discourse and activities of critical communities within the movement. On this basis, four stages of development are identified. It is fascinating to observe how members of the movement select the issues, as well as the tools for resolving these issues, in accordance with the spirit of the times in which they live, but at the same time they always pick up the main themes of the movement which are being reproduced in this way.

Pioneers of the movement previously fought for soil fertility (1930s), followed by the raising concern over the negative effects of chemical substances used in industrial agriculture (1940–1960s), later adopting an environmental focus to consider pollution of the planet and the humans dependent upon it (1970–2000s), to the current issues – the global climate change, the preservation of natural resources, the impact of human consumption, and social justice.

*Rebels for the Soil* is not merely a simple description of the past. Subtle details that are present in the text are always embedded within wider relationships, giving them the necessary context and together assembling the narrative of the organic movement. What is also important is that the account is not written in black and white, but throughout it emphasises the ambivalence of the observed facts and their inner contradictions. The book is particularly valuable in this respect, because it uncovers the trouble spots of the current organic sector that are also present in the ongoing debate as to whether the organic sector has the potential to transform the system of food production into a more sustainable state.

The author also presents many arguments relevant to the so-called conventionalisation thesis (despite the fact that he does not explicitly refer to this concept and the word itself is never mentioned in this volume). The point is that the perspective of the sociology of

the social movement removes much of the pathos from the account of conventionalisation. The growth of the sector, based on cooperation by farmers, consumers and retailers, is simply one of the goals that were adapted by the movement at the beginning of the 1980s. The author does not advocate the strategy, which has generally been considered as the impetus for a more flexible organic ideology, but he rejects the romantic notions depicting the first entrepreneurs as innovators and the subsequent ones as mere opportunists, because the ability and opportunities to configure the farming business can hardly be taken as an indication of the “organicness” of the farmers’ attitudes or of their enterprises (p. 102). A similar viewpoint is for instance held on cooperation between the organic sector and large retail chain stores. The major problem of distributing organic food through this channel is not the fact that supermarkets are “big and mean”, but rather the fact that large companies are positioning certified products as luxury brands and the demand for them is thus strongly influenced by economic cycles.

Therefore, the main challenge for future development rests on something entirely different. Regarding the past activities of the organic movement, the author points out the need to build a strategy which reflects the current problems, and to find its link to politics. Without this association, it is impossible to practically realise the cultural changes and truly transform the methods of food production and consumption with regard to the environment. A major opportunity for the organic movement is represented by the issue of the global climate change, because the intrinsic nature of this problem is directly linked to agriculture. The organic movement has the best premises for joining

this debate, since it has been linked to the notorious question of the overall impact of food production and consumption on the environment (p. 136). How the organic movement will tackle this problem is a matter for the movement’s future strategy.

In the concluding part of the book, the author sets out three possible strategies. Organic agriculture can (1) turn into a simple technology, (2) follow and enhance the strategy of growth through the organic food marketing or (3) point out the social and ethical dimensions of organic agriculture and consequently stand up for high environmental standards in agriculture. It appears that the third method is the strategy that meets the potential for the cultural and social change in society and gives the movement a new *raison d’être* for the future.

I am convinced that *Rebels for the Soil* is a valuable publication which should become an important source of information for Czech scholars. The Czech Republic (just like other post-socialist countries) lacks the tradition of an organic movement. The period of the 1990s, when the organic movement was blooming in Western Europe, was a dark age of organics in Czechia. Similarly, the campaign of the movement against GMO, which gained a lot of public attention, has remained almost completely out of focus in the Czech Republic, and overall, the Czech organic discourse is thematically being “delayed” – as one can see by the attitude of consumers and also of the public administration bodies. Information on the development of the global organic movement is thus of vital importance for the comprehension of the differences and for a better understanding of the current state of the sector in the Czech Republic and other post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

*Lukas Zagata, Department of Humanities, Faculty of Economics and Management,  
Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic*