

Aistara, G. A. *Organic Sovereignties: Struggles over Farming in an Age of Free Trade*. Seattle, University of Washington Press. 2018. 263 pages. ISBN: 9780295743110. \$30 (paperback) \$90 (hardcover)

***Organic Sovereignties: Struggles over Farming
in an Age of Free Trade***

The central aim of this book is to provide a nuanced picture of the barriers and opportunities for achieving food sovereignty in an age of globalisation and regional free trade agreements. It approaches this study from the compelling vantage point of organic farmers, markets, and social movements at the peripheries of global capitalism. This is a work of environmental anthropology and the author's method is a multi-sited (Latvia and Costa Rica) and long-term (10 years plus of data from each site) ethnography. The choice of cases ensures differences in culture and environment to make interesting contrasts but enough similarities in their histories of economic integration and exclusion to make for compelling comparisons and credible conclusions as to the struggles and prospects for organic agriculture in achieving food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. While food sovereignty has emerged as an alternative rural development framework to the globalised agro-industrial food system, there has been little cross-country comparative work examining the challenges and opportunities in achieving food sovereignty, such as that offered in this volume. The book is organised around a succession of thematic chapters that chronicle the struggles of organic farmers and their movements in Costa Rica and Latvia to achieve food sovereignty. The author is commended for truly engaging in a thoughtful comparison of the data from each ethnographic site within each chapter. The comparative aspect of this work reveals remarkably similar processes emerging in very different contexts.

The introduction lays out the central aim and methodology of the book. Chapter 1 details the agrarian history of each country, especially focussing on the roles of small-scale family agriculture and the state in agrarian development. Similarities emerge, such as small-scale farmers' in both countries historical embracing of, rather than resistance to, state support and protection in their quest for sovereignty over their land and livelihoods. Chapter 2 outlines how organic farmer movements in each country responded politically to their prospective entry into regional trade agreements. Chapter 3 is an inventive exploration of cultural memory and how it influences the farming landscape in each country. It is convincingly argued that familial and national histories intermingle in organic farmers' imaginaries to produce their

farming systems. Chapter 4 challenges static notions of biodiversity conservation and instead insists, with plenty of ethnographic detail to back it up, that the diversity found on organic farms in Costa Rica and Latvia is best understood as a socio-ecological process. Chapter 5 describes the numerous ways that policy changes resulting from the eventual entry into the Central American Free Trade Agreement (for Costa Rica) and the European Union (for Latvia) threatened farmer sovereignty and farm diversity. Chapter 6 recounts how these new policies led to the collapse of an organic dairy cooperative in Latvia and an organic coffee cooperative in Costa Rica. In both cases, the emergence of new standards led to complications for the organic food system. The focus here on learning from calamity and collapse is much appreciated, as often the literature on food sovereignty is biased towards the inclusion of only successful cases. Chapter 7 examines the tensions that organic farmer organisations in each country face when they are simultaneously operating as markets and social movements. As social movements mature, they always face tough choices, and this chapter does an admirable job of portraying the tensions faced by the organic movements in Latvia and Costa Rica; between production and conservation as well as bureaucratisation and protest. Finally, a concluding chapter reviews and ties together the disparate themes from the book.

There are two important lessons that this book offers for academics, policy makers and activists working in conservation, sustainable agriculture, and agrarian social movements. First, it convincingly argues that organic farms should not just be conceptualised as a list of practices or land-uses, but as sites where farmers are "place-making" based upon their own cultural and historical imaginaries. It essentially argues that we need to understand organic practices and conservation outcomes as the nuanced result of place making based in both cultural memory and hopes for the future. Understanding and supporting these processes will lead to better outcomes for both farmers and society.

Second, it corrects a tendency amongst scholars and bureaucrats to reduce biodiversity to lists of species, arguing that diversity must be defined socio-ecologically and that conservation efforts cannot afford to overlook the impact of social networks in creating and maintaining biological diversity. The author provides ample evidence that the biodiversity of species and germplasm found on the organic farms of Costa Rica and Latvia is motivated by social and cultural processes within families and communities of organic farmers, contending that agrobiodiversity conservation

“policies must resonate with cultural memories, place-based ecological knowledge of the present, and future imaginaries of residents (page 134)”. If biodiversity is reimagined in this way as a relational process, the author argues, we will not only value lists of threatened species or hotspots, but also farmer practices and livelihoods. While realistic as to the prospects of small-scale agriculture in the face of the globalised agro-industrial food system, the book offers some careful optimism that if these two lessons are incorporated into the worldview of academics, policy makers, and activists involved in supporting agriculture; then farmer’s quest for food sovereignty will be strengthened.

While I cannot speak to the Latvian context, my personal experiences working with small-scale sustainable coffee farmers in Costa Rica confirms the insights into the nature of Costa Rican small-scale and organic farming and the cultural politics and attitudes towards farming and conservation identified in this book. This book should be required reading for students or scholars entering fieldwork in these respective countries. This book would also make an excellent case study to compliment graduate or advanced undergraduate courses in environmental anthropology and agrarian studies.

Overall, this book accomplishes its central aim. The author’s presence in each country before, during, and after their entrance into regional trade agreements offers a comprehensive and unique insight into the impacts of these agreements on organic farming and the struggle for food sovereignty. The volume

identifies a paradox in the relationship between organic agriculture and food sovereignty that would be interesting to examine in other contexts; that organic agriculture both constrains farmers under standards and various other forms of control while also opening up opportunities for organic farmers and their movements to acquire autonomy.

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