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Lisa F. Clark, 2015, *The Changing Politics of Organic Food in North America*

Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar Publishing, 264 p

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Organic food is everywhere—from suburban Walmarts to local farmer’s markets. From 2005 to 2010, sales of organic food in Canada and the USA more than doubled, and by 2012, the market reached \$27 billion with more than 40 million consumers purchasing at least some type of organic food that year.¹ But what is “organic” food? And how has this rapid change in scale altered what consumers, governments, and stakeholders consider to be “organic”? Lisa Clark provides a thorough, scholarly accounting of the early beginnings of organic agriculture, how this type of production found support in the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and the subsequent institutionalization and resultant codification of organic standards into federal-level legislation beginning in the 1990s.

The central premise of this attempt to explore the politics of organic food is a description and analysis of the gradual bifurcation of the definition of organic into a process versus product-based standard. Clark explains that early stakeholders (i.e., producers, retailers, consumers) in organic foods viewed their efforts as a direct challenge to the exploitative socioeconomic relationships found in conventional agriculture.² A process-based definition of organic, comprised of a set of mutually dependent principles and accompanying practices designed to ensure economic viability and environmental and social sustainability, independent of government and agribusiness, could reverse national priorities and create a more just food system.³ Leaders in the organic movement turned to the

market as a “place of opportunity” to challenge these dominant industrial forms,⁴ believing that it was in an independent and transparent market through which those seeking to revolutionize the food system could reach (and also educate) consumers who would choose to support organic agriculture and eventually replace the industrial agricultural system.⁵

But as Clark insightfully explains, the market, especially the food/agribusiness market is not a politically neutral institution, and thus the nascent organic market, as it gained significant financial potential, became susceptible to competitive corporate behavior.⁶ And the absence of formal standards for organic foods—a byproduct of the decentralized decision-making and self-regulation of the organic social movement—left the sector vulnerable to entry by those actors with competing definitions of organic.⁷ The initial, process-based interlocking principles—most acutely social sustainability—presented significant challenges to large-scale corporate actors seeking to employ conventional agricultural practices in the organic context and capture the growing demand for certified organic products.⁸ But through vertical and horizontal integration by way of mergers and acquisitions, as well as brand introductions, corporate strategies associated with agribusiness or other emerging markets were introduced and replicated throughout the organic food sector with significant consequences for the future direction of the market.⁹

After a thorough and informative descriptive background in the opening chapters, Clark’s most innovative analysis begins in Chapter six, which offers a careful critique regarding the evolution of the organic social movement and the change in political opportunities, mobilizing structures and framing processes. Chapter seven details the rise of corporate influence

¹ Page 1 citing Haumann, 2014.

² Page 13, 33

³ Page 27

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⁴ Page 188

⁵ Page 188

⁶ Page 188.

⁷ Page 182

⁸ Page 3

⁹ Page 42

and the subsequent institutionalization and standardization of the organic definition, concluding that a product-based approach has now fully supplanted the original process-based definition due to a broader change in the market organization of organic food. In chronicling the brief public debate regarding the definition of organic, Clark notes that corporate interests, with their greater political and economic resources upon which to draw, was able to supplant other interest groups that did not have a unified position on organic principles.¹⁰ Clark also offers a unique analysis of the role that international trade agreements (e.g., NAFTA, WTO) and organizations such as the Codex and IFOAM, have in reinforcing a product-based definition of organic (Chapter 5). The privileged status of product-based definitions in international standard and accreditation

schemes, and the effort to harmonize these standards to facilitate trade and expand the organic market, provided further market and institutional pressure to transform organic away from its original subjective, process-based system.¹¹

Clark is careful not to explicitly judge this transformation, but rather offers unique insight regarding the continued role of consumer demand and activism in the current evolution of organic standards. Moreover, although she concludes that the respective national regulatory systems in Canada and the USA have shifted decision-making from private to public bodies, private interests, both corporate and advocacy-based, have a crucial and continued role to play in the future evolution of organic policy frameworks.¹²

¹⁰ Page 186

¹¹ Page 135

¹² Page 185