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Government Policy, Grassroots Programs, and Cooperatives:  
A Comparative Study of the Organic Movements in the  
United States and Venezuela

In the mountains of Venezuela, a custom of “mano vuelta” or lending a hand has always existed (class lecture 10/24/08). The creation of “La Alianza,” a cooperative farm in the state of Lara, is consistent with this tradition of cooperation (class lecture 10/24/08). As the negative effects of agricultural chemicals became apparent during the 1970s, “Las Lajitas”, an organic farm within the larger cooperative, was established in the 1980s (class lecture 10/24/08). “Las Lajitas” is one of the few organic farms within Venezuela, and it is considered a model of the recently surfacing organic movement (class lecture 10/24/08). Contrasting to the emerging organic movement in Venezuela, the organic movement in the United States has existed for over fifty years (Kirschenmann 6). Thus, the United States and Venezuela are at different stages of their respective organic movements, and both have unique government policies and grassroots programs that support these movements.

In the United States, the organic movement began in the early twentieth century with the realization that pesticides, fertilizers, and other practices of industrial agriculture would not support a sustainable food system (Kirschenmann 6). *Organic Farming and Gardening*, a magazine by J.I. Rodale, a prominent publisher, author, and leader in alternative health, informed many about the benefits of organic agriculture during the 1940s (Klonsky and Tourte 1, Pilzer). Rodale emphasized the importance of “understanding and working with natural systems” instead of constantly trying to combat

the forces of nature (Klonsky and Tourte 1). However, the late 1940s ushered in the beginning of the “industrialization of our food” (Pollan, “Omnivore” 41). Left with excess after the Second World War, the United States government decided to use the surplus ammonium nitrate, formally used to make explosives, as an agricultural fertilizer (Pollan, “Omnivore” 41). Both pesticide and chemical fertilizer industries expanded as a result of the government trying to convert factories once used to make weapons productive again (Pollan, “Omnivore” 41). With the emergence of industrial agriculture, heavy chemical use increased agricultural productivity dramatically, slowing the growth of the organic movement (Klonsky and Tourte 1). However, in 1962, Rachel Carson published her celebrated book, *Silent Spring* (Klonsky and Tourte 1). This raised awareness of the negative effects of industrial agriculture and initiated an interest in the organic movement once again (Klonsky and Tourte 1).

The organic movement continued to gain popularity during the 1960s and 1970s, and whether for health or support of organic farmers, there were a variety of reasons that people chose to eat organically (Kirschenmann 7, Klonsky and Tourte 1). The organic movement expanded and impressed the importance of using nonrenewable resources in a sustainable manner (Klonsky and Tourte 1). For example, instead of using fossil fuels, solar panels and wind turbines were encouraged to generate energy (Jacob 13). A popular movement from the middle of the 1960s to the 1970s, the back-to-the-land movement opposed the “irrational materialism of urban life” and thousands moved from the cities to the country to live off the land in a sustainable manner (Jacob 3). The terms that are used constantly today, like “low-input, ecological, and sustainable” began to

appear in the 1980s and portrayed an agriculture system that was “environmentally benign, economically sound, and socially just” (Klonsky and Tourte 2).

Due to the lack of an official certifying agency in the United States, consumers initially were unable to distinguish between foods produced organically and foods produced through conventional farming (Kirschenmann 7, Klonsky and Tourte 2). In the grocery store, foods falsely labeled organic were actually receiving an unfair economic advantage because more consumers were choosing the “organic” products (Kirschenmann 7, Klonsky and Tourte 2). Because of consumer confusion, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture was established to certify organic food in the 1970s (Kirschenmann 7). With any type of market a rising demand equals an increasing supply, and the organic movement is no exception (Kirschenmann 7). The organic industry emerged, and it aimed to offer organic products to the general public (Kirschenmann 7). Unlike the organic movement, based on farming methods and the relationship with food, the organic industry, as a business, is striving to make a significant profit (Kirschenmann 7).

With the development of the organic industry, the federal government of the United States needed to create several laws and policies that would insure legitimate growing of organic food. The United States congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act in 1990 to regulate organic agriculture and institute “national standards for organic products” (“National Organic Standards”). The National Organic Standards Board was founded by the Organic Foods Production Act to continue improving organic standards (“National Organic Standards”). However, before a national organic rule, there were several states and independent organizations that established organic guidelines

("National Organic Standards"). October 1998 marked the release of the proposed organic rule by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) ("National Organic Standards"). Within the USDA organic rule, there are various labels that organic products are able to have including "100% Organic," "Organic," or "made with organic ingredients" ("Organic Certification"). In order to use the official USDA seal, products require at least ninety five percent organic ingredients to be labeled "Organic" and every ingredient to be organic in order to be labeled "100% Organic" ("National Organic Standards"). However, a label stating "made with organic ingredients" must contain no less than seventy percent organic ingredients. In addition, the product is not permitted to use the USDA seal ("Organic Certification). The "made with organic ingredients" label indicates the major organic ingredients of the product on the packaging ("Organic Certification"). Products containing less than seventy percent organic ingredients are unable to use the word "organic" on the front of the product ("Organic Certification").

However, in the original USDA guidelines, "USDA proposed allowing bioengineered crops, sewage sludge, and irradiation in organic production," the organic rule proposal of 1998 was faced with major disapproval, with "an unprecedented 325,603 public comments" due to the inclusion of the "big three" ("National Organic Standards"). The improved, final organic rule issued in 2002, did not include the "big three," but was also highly criticized by both "organic farmers and environmentalists" ("National Organic Standards"). Many disagreed with the synthetic substances permitted in organic products as well as the animal feed used in the organic dairy industry. Although efforts were made to change the final organic rule, it was unsuccessful due to the government decision to side with the Organic Trade Association ("National Organic Standards"). This

has caused distrust of the government in the organic community, and as a result alternatives to government certification have been created. An example of an alternative certification agency is Certified Naturally Grown (“Home Page”).

Certified Naturally Grown is a grassroots program unaffiliated with the government that began after the USDA’s final organic rule was put into effect about six years ago (“Home Page”). At that time many farmers were struggling because the USDA required that organic farmers making more than 5,000 dollars per year must be certified in order to label products as “organic”, while small scale farmers, making less than 5,000 dollars are permitted to use the word “organic” without receiving certification specified amount are not required to become certified (Klonsky and Tourte 7). Farmers making more than 5,000 dollars had to decide whether to spend significant time and money on paperwork to become “Certified Organic” or to relinquish the label of “organic” all together (“Home Page”). Instead, a group of farmers came together and created Certified Naturally Grown, an alternative to USDA certification that is recognized nationally, although not by the government, and does not require the financial burden of being “Certified Organic” by USDA (“Home Page”). Certified Naturally Grown includes over 600 farms, and applies no fertilizers, uses sustainable agricultural techniques, and chooses not to plant genetically modified seeds (Certified Naturally Grown).

The United States Farm Bill, another government policy, is the most significant federal policy on agriculture and food, and because it affects all food consumed in the United States, it affects every American citizen (“U.S. Farm Bill”). Updated every five years, the Farm Bill influences food stamp availability, agricultural research, conservation efforts, farmer support, and food safety (“Farm Bill 101”). The Farm Bill is

made up of ten titles or sections including Energy, Commodity Programs, Nutrition Programs, Conservation, and Forestry (“Farm Bill 101”). Although all the titles of the Farm Bill relate indirectly, Conservation and Energy appear to have the most significant impact on the organic movement and organic agriculture (“Farm Bill 101”). Within the Conservation title, there are several programs (“Farm Bill 101”). The Conservation Reserve Program encourages farmers to use sustainable practices to create farmland that can be used long-term. While the Environmental Quality Incentives Program gives financial assistance to farmers to utilize environmentally friendly practices such as wastewater management and soil and habitat conservation (“Farm Bill 101”). Additionally, the Conservation Security Program provides incentives for farmers already utilizing environmental practices to further invest in land management and conservation (“Farm Bill 101”). The Energy title emphasizes the dependency of the United States on fossil fuels, and encourages the use of renewable energy sources (“Farm Bill 101”).

There has been both critique of and praise for the Farm Bill, as it certainly impacts the organic movement and organic agriculture in the United States. The Farm Bill is often criticized for subsidizing “agribusiness and the food industry” (Flaccavento). As Michael Pollan writes in the New York Times article “Weed It and Reap”,

*For the first time, the public health community has raised its voice in support of overturning farm policies that subsidize precisely the wrong kind of calories (added fat and added sugar), helping to make Twinkies cheaper than carrots and Coca-Cola competitive with water.*

The Commodity Title of the Farm Bill causes the most conflicts because it subsidizes the corn and wheat crops of large producers, and most corn and wheat are used to make

unhealthy, “processed” foods or “livestock feed” of industrial producers of meat (Cook). However, the production of fruits and vegetables are not subsidized, and organic foods receive no government funding (Cook). Because the crops of “large growers” are often subsidized, the Farm Bill involuntarily favors pesticide use and soil degradation, common side effects of industrial farms (Cook). For the majority of industrial farms it is necessary to use pesticides, in order to protect the monoculture of crops from harmful pests (Cook). However, these chemicals contaminate the air, water, and soil, endangering the population and affecting the quality of food (Cook). Also, the growing of the same crop year after year destroys the quality of the soil by removing essential nutrients (Cook).

Many policy makers, members of the general public, and the “public health community,” disagree with the 2007 Farm Bill, while others are hopeful about a possible change in the United States agricultural system (Pollan, “Weed It and Reap”). The 2007 Farm Bill plans to include a small amount of financial support for organic farmers as well as more funding to provide fresh produce to school cafeterias and food assistance programs (Enis). Although it does not provide funding for programs that would assist conventional farmers in converting to organic or to guarantee that current organic programs will be successful in the future (Enis). Because the United States Farm Bill is controversial, it is imperative to research but also to interview different people to formulate a personal opinion. The annual conference for the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture provided ample opportunity to gain various perspectives.

Melanie Saffer, a representative from Pennsylvania Certified Organic, a government certification agency, believes the Farm Bill has encouraged, rather than hindered the expansion of organic by setting national organic standards in the 1990 Farm

Bill. In addition, USDA certification is a “recognizable” and reliable label and actually includes a transition team that supports the conversion between conventional and organic farms (Saffer). Saffer also discussed the new Presidential Administration, and the exciting possibility of a White House Garden and the Obama family choosing to eat organic.

On the other hand, a representative from Tuscarora Organic Growers holds a different opinion of United States Farm Bill. Tuscarora Organic Growers is a cooperative of more than twenty-six producers, growing mostly organic fruit and vegetables that are all certified organic by “independent certifying agencies” (Tuscarora Organic Growers). Tuscarora Organic Growers focus on “Local Organic” and do not buy organic products traveling long distances but instead focus on small, local farms that are able to offer high quality foods (Tuscarora Organic Growers). Because of its cooperative structure, farmers receive nearly full price for the products sold (Tuscarora Organic Growers). As a cooperative, Tuscarora Organic Growers allows farmers to make decisions about how food is produced and where it is sold, provides entry to markets, and supplies customers with a variety of produce (Tuscarora Organic Growers). Martin Lichty, the representative for the Tuscarora Organic Growers, believes the United States Farm Bill has no effect, especially in central Pennsylvania, and there is little to no money directed towards organic. Lichty believes that large corporations often pressure the government for less stringent standards, making organic certification easier to attain, thus less valid. He suggests improving the Farm Bill by providing price supports to sustainable farms, similar to the funding provided to large conventional farms by the United States government (Lichty). In addition, Lichty mentioned the importance of infrastructure. For



example, in the United States, people who own conservation land are paid not to develop the land although it may be valuable farmland (Lichty). However, it is important to utilize fertile land for agricultural and conserve land that is difficult to farm or easily erodes (Lichty).

Another cooperative, Organic Valley Farms, a dairy cooperative that works on a national scale in over thirty states also believes in the importance of local and organic and shared similar views about the United States Farm Bill and government certification (Organic Valley). A representative from Organic Valley Farms discussed that the purpose of the United States Department of Agriculture certification was to “level the playing field,” but that it is the easiest way to receive organic certification because of the low standards. In addition, the Farm Bill, as the representative explained, does nothing for organic agriculture (Organic Valley representative). There will be a victory for organic agriculture but no funding will be provided to actually make changes occur (Organic Valley representative). Contrasting Pennsylvania Certified Organic, Organic Valley Farms has no expectations of the new Presidential administration (Organic Valley representative).

At the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture conference, it was interesting to discover the numerous types of farming cooperatives that exist, especially in American society where emphasis is placed on the individual rather than the group. Cooperatives promote community, working together to benefit the whole. Unlike the United States, cooperatives are a way of life in the socialist country of Venezuela where community is valued over the individual. Is there a connection between cooperatives and organic agriculture in the United States? After speaking with representatives from

Pennsylvania Certified Organic, Tuscarora Organic Growers, and Organic Valley, the unanticipated response is yes. Like Melanie Saffer, from Pennsylvania Certified Organic explained, in developing countries, like Venezuela, the cooperative structure is imperative to survival, while in the United States it is not essential for people to work together. However, the essence of sustainable organic agriculture and local farmers growing food for the local community embodies the spirit of the cooperative.

Government policy and grassroots programs have recently changed the identity of “organic” in the United States. Over thirty years ago, organic food was thought to be “hippie food, crunchy granola and bricklike brown bread” (“Mass Natural”). Currently, as Michael Pollan writes, organic food is viewed differently,

*Eating organic has been fixed in the collective imagination as an upper-middle-class luxury, a blue-state affectation as easy to mock as Volvos or lattes. On the cultural spectrum, organic stands at the far opposite extreme from NASCAR or Wal-Mart.*

Although some view this drastic change as progress for the organic movement, others are wary of the affects on organic food with the advent of the organic industry. When organic food stops becoming a luxury item and is available for the masses, will the quality of the food suffer? What is the future of the organic movement in the United States? Recently, in South Los Angeles, there was a ban placed on the opening of new fast food restaurants for one year, not only encouraging better eating habits but also the consumption of more healthy, local food (Hennessy-Fiske). Councilwoman Jan Perry, the primary supporter of the ban, was most concerned with the amount of diabetes and obesity in the area (Hennessy-Fiske). Hopefully, the organic movement will expand and continue its growth

of recent years (Klonsky and Tourte 12). Many believe that organic agriculture is the solution to problems such as “food safety”, “environmental quality”, and “the viability of local communities” (Klonsky and Tourte 12). Regardless of the reason, eating organically is the socially just, environmentally conscious, and healthier option when deciding between foods produced through industrial agriculture and organic farming.

Outside of Burlington, Vermont, the Intervale Center, a non-profit 350-acre farm has a special mission to “develop farm- and land-based enterprises that generate economic and social opportunity while protecting natural resources” (“Intervale Home Page”). The Intervale Farms Program acts as an “incubator,” supporting beginning farmers with little experience and providing equipment, seed, land, and a market to sell products (“Intervale Farms Program”). Although not a cooperative, the Intervale Center is an educational resource that is promoting organic agriculture as well as a forum for discussion and advice (“Intervale Farms Program”). Similar to “Las Lajitas,” the Venezuelan organic cooperative, the Intervale Center also provides farmers with useful, valuable information and encourages working together and organic agriculture.

Although numerous cooperatives in the United States appear to be directly connected to organic agriculture, in Venezuela, a socialist country of the “mano vuelta” tradition, cooperatives are a way of life. After two weeks of traveling, researching, and learning about the political system, organic agriculture, and culture of Venezuela, it became clear that President Hugo Frías Chávez has created significant change. When Chávez came to power for the first time in 1998, only 768 cooperatives existed within the entire country (Harnecker 1). Currently, there are over 200,000 cooperatives ranging from agricultural cooperatives like “Las Lajitas,” to cooperatives of fisherman to

cooperatives producing bread or tomato sauce (Pedro Garcia). However, after speaking with and interviewing farmers from “Las Lajitas” and various residents of Monte Carmelo, the small town where our group resided for the majority of the trip, it appears that cooperatives and organic agriculture are not directly connected (Tita Garcia). The most probable reason is the strong government encouragement of cooperatives in all types of industry in Venezuela (Tita Garcia).

Though there is an established organic movement in the United States, the main question to answer while in Venezuela was, does the organic movement exist here? Father Mario Grippo, a founding member of “Las Lajitas,” and expert in herbal remedies discussed two reasons why it is more difficult for Venezuela to transition to certified organic when compared with the United States. First, the tropical climate of Venezuela is the ideal environment for fast growing weeds, making it difficult to control the weeds with only organic techniques (Mario Grippo). Second, foreign and private certification is expensive and not within the means of most farmers as well as a lack of government certification (Mario Grippo). Father Mario believes that with the early status of “Las Lajitas” as organic and the numerous courses for farmers that Las Lajitas offers, that this organic cooperative is quite possibly the birthplace of the organic movement in Venezuela.

On the first day working on the cooperative farm, several people from Caracas, Alexandra, Paola, and Aaron, specialists in Homotherapy, answered several questions about the organic movement in Venezuela. Although the Venezuelan organic movement is in its infancy, they believe an organic movement is occurring, proof provided by the existence of “Las Lajitas” and the many farmers who travel to attend courses at the Casa

Campesina (Homotherapy Specialists). Similar to the United States, the catalyst for the organic movement was the harm caused by the heavy pesticide use of industrial farms (Omar Garcia). As Omar Garcia, another founding member of the cooperative explained, visiting doctors performed a blood test for many residents of Monte Carmelo and found high levels of toxins not only in the farmers, but anyone who came in regular contact with the chemicals, such as the wives and children of farmers (Omar Garcia). Women were directly exposed to the chemicals through washing vegetables and cleaning clothes that husbands wore to work in the fields, and children ingested the chemicals through contaminated breast milk (Omar Garcia). This encouraged members of “Las Lajitas” to use natural farming methods (Omar Garcia). Unfortunately, most of Venezuela, like the neighboring town of Quibor that faces devastating birth deformities and high rates of disease due to pesticide use, has not been inspired to change industrial practices (Omar Garcia).

Before Chávez came to power, the town of Monte Carmelo and “Las Lajitas” received foreign aid from SWISSAID, an international aid institution of the Swiss government with a project that specifically focuses on supporting small organic farms, now occurring in Colombia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua (“SWISSAID in Columbia”). According to Tita Garcia, both the Swiss and French governments assisted “Las Lajitas” in the past (Tita Garcia). However, with the Chávez administration, there are several government policies that support sustainable agriculture. First, Article 19 of “La Ley de Tierras,” a separate document from the Bolivarian Constitution states,

*Se reconoce el conuco como fuente histórica de la biodiversidad agraria. El Ejecutivo Nacional promoverá, en aquellas áreas desarrolladas por conuqueros, la*

*investigación y la difusión de las técnicas ancestrales de cultivo, el control ecológico de plagas, las técnicas de preservación de suelos y la conservación de los germoplasmas en general. (“Ley de Tierras”)*

Generally, Article 19 translates to the government supporting the “conuco” or kitchen garden that is the historic source of agricultural biodiversity in Venezuela. In areas developed by “conqueros,” the government plans to investigate ancestral techniques, ecological control of pests, and soil preservation (“Ley de Tierras”). The “conuco” is way for individuals to sustain themselves and also a way to return to the roots of Venezuelan agriculture. By encouraging the “conuco,” Article 19 is supporting more sustainable, local food.

In “La Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela,” Article 307 references land reforms in Venezuela, the purpose of is to provide farmers with fertile land where food can be produced to benefit the farmer as well as all of Venezuela (“Constitution”). Article 307 of the Venezuelan Constitution supports sustainable agriculture. Also, multiple projects at “Las Lajitas” like the construction of new greenhouses or Vermiculture were funded by government grants. In addition to economic support such as grants, laws and articles put in place by the government are being enacted within society. First, the various agricultural courses offered at “Las Lajitas” educate farmers, students, and members of the government about the benefits and practices of organic agriculture (Brouwer). Second, one of the social missions, Mission Zamora, redistributes unused fertile land, ideal for farming, to farming cooperatives in order to “establish self-sufficiency in food production” ( Venezuela Information Office).

While eating dinner in Venezuela with Professor Rose, Professor Halpin, and Alexandra, Paola, and Aaron, the Homatherapy specialists, Professor Rose made an interesting comment comparing certification in the United States to certification in Venezuela. Professor Rose observed that the certification systems are contrasting, a handful of farms in Venezuela are actually organic but are unable to be certified. While in the United States, organic farms are able to become certified, but less stringent standards may result in farms that claim to be “organic” but do not adhere to regulations. It is apparent that organic certification is necessary to expand the organic movements in the United States and Venezuela. As Tita Garcia discussed while picking coffee and corn in her backyard “conuco,” Venezuela needs to make organic food mainstream and recognizable to the public. Currently, in the grocery stores and markets around Venezuela, there is no distinction in price made between organically and industrially produced foods, although organic food is more expensive to produce (Homatherapy Specialists). It is imperative to the success of organic agriculture that a viable certification program is created (Homatherapy Specialists). In the United States, at this time, organic food is expensive and considered a luxury that the majority of the population cannot afford.

At the start of the Venezuela Mosaic, I had numerous questions, most of which were difficult to find in a book or website, and required travel, field work, and research to answer. I was curious, does the organic movement exist in Venezuela as it does in the United States? Does a connection exist between cooperatives and organic agriculture in the United States and Venezuela? How do government policies and grassroots programs affect the organic movement in the United States and Venezuela? In Venezuela, the

model, organic cooperative “Las Lajitas,” offers a variety of courses on organic agriculture, and several government policies, prove that the organic seed has been planted and is beginning to grow into a movement. However, a lack of grassroots programs, organic certification, and consumer awareness, in addition to heavy pesticide use throughout the country, has hindered the expansion of an organic movement. Through my observations and conversations in Venezuela, it is apparent that an established organic movement, like that of the United States, does not exist. Although, in the future, with continued education for both consumers and farmers, it is certainly possible.

In the increasingly socialist Venezuela, cooperatives have expanded to every industry, becoming part of the political infrastructure. This includes the few organic farms and cooperatives, but consists of much more. In contrast, the ideals of organic agriculture in the United States have translated to cooperative farming, forming a connection between the two. The government policies of the United States, such as the Farm Bill, face criticism from the majority of organizations that maintain an allegiance to local, organic food, like Organic Valley Farms and Tuscarora Organic Growers. The majority of support for organic agriculture comes from alternative certification, like Certified Naturally Grown. It is imperative, in the United States, Venezuela, and globally, if not for the environment, then for the benefit of humanity, to consider the transition from industrial farming to organic agriculture as vital to the survival of the human race. As Tita Garcia remarked while picking coffee, “The world is dying, and while we may be able to help alleviate some issues by living sustainably, we will never be able to totally cure the earth.”



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