Social skill and the making of fields: The initial formation of the Australian organic industry in the 1980s

by

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Abstract
This paper explores the actions and events during the early to mid-1980s, which contributed to the initial formation of a recognisable Australian organic food industry. I use the metaphor of the social movement to explore the process of market emergence. Focus is given to one actor’s attempt to orient the actions of previously unconnected state-based organic organisations, into a national coalition. Findings offer broad insight into strategies of collective mobilisation, and the degree to which they resonated with the targeted groups.

Key words: economic sociology, neo-institutionalism, fields, social skill, organic agriculture.

Word Count: 3108

Prior to the 1980s, there was no united organic industry in Australia. Little dialogue passed between organic farmers in each of the different states; no public or private certification program existed; no universities or colleges officially taught organic agriculture, and no legislation governed what ‘organic’ actually meant (Fritz & Wynen 2007: 227). In 1983, Sandy Fritz was writing a thesis for her diploma in agriculture at Hawkesbury College in New South Wales (now part of the University of Western Sydney). The thesis entitled – ‘A National Organisation for Organic Agriculture’ – outlined what a future organic industry would look like if several state-focused organisations were linked under a national representative body. Drawing on the thesis content, Fritz spent the next few years cultivating support for her proposal (Fritz & Wynen 2007: 228).
My paper aims to explore and offer broad insight into key actions and events during the early to mid-1980s, which contributed to the initial formation of a recognisable Australian organic food industry. Following the work of economic sociologist Neil Fligstein, I will use the metaphor of the social movement to explore the initial stage of market emergence. The focus will be on one key actor’s attempt to orient the actions of previously unconnected organisations into a national coalition.

Theoretical Approach

Neoclassical economics understands markets as being whenever ‘two or more’ rational actors, ‘enter into a transaction, regardless of time or place’ (Gravelle and Rees 1992: 3). Abolafia (2005) argues that mainstream economics fixation on explaining supply and demand, largely ignores the question of how markets emerge in the first place. This economic account:

... [assumes] that when people gather together in the name of self interest, then a market somehow always emerges in their midst. The market seems to arise simply as a result of these spontaneous interactions, as a result neither of a protracted process of multiple institution building, nor of the full development of a historically specific commercial nature. (Abolafia 2005: 1)

Neo-institutional sociology challenges the position of mainstream economics, by identifying the formal and informal institutions (i.e. laws and practices) that create the conditions under which markets emerge, become stable or transform (see Powell & DiMaggio 1991). Fligstein (2001: 30) argues that the unstructured haphazard market is capable of producing beneficial economic exchange, but only in the short-term. Under such conditions, relationships are fleeting and anonymous, and as such, do not give actors
the reassurance of long-term stability and survival. For Fligstein, much of what happens in markets is an attempt to control uncertainty (with for example, competitors, customers, suppliers and the state), by instituting collective rules that facilitate ‘stable worlds’ of repeated exchange.

The institutional approach gains conceptual leverage by understanding markets as ‘fields’ (Bourdieu 1977), ‘sectors’ (Meyer and Scott 1983) or ‘organisational fields’ (DiMaggio & Powell 1991). A field is a situation that ‘implies that firms watch one another, engage in strategic action vis-à-vis one another, and look to one another for clues as to what constitutes successful behavior’ (Fligstein 2007: 111). Each field is constituted by its own set of socially constructed understandings that define the nature of relationships between actors and their social space. This refers to both the objective institutional landscape, and an interpretive framework (or cognitive frames) that enable actors to make sense and anticipate the actions of others (Fligstein & McAdam: 1993). The construction of these two field characteristics give actors the tools to dynamically survey their situation and ‘determine what normal and legitimate strategy they should adopt’ from period to period (Hass 2007: 212).

Emerging Markets and the Skill of Actors

According to Fligstein (2001: 76) when markets emerge, the institutional conditions are ‘wide open and fluid’, because the collective conception of ‘what the market will be’ is yet to be negotiated. As noted by Lee & Fine (2006: 4) the nascent market is ‘generally characterised by significant ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding products, actions, and
the legitimacy and status of market players … [thus] this ambiguity must be mitigated in order for a market to become established and grow’.

Actions during this time can be understood as that of a social movement, where market actors attempt to mobilise others into political coalitions around their particular understanding of how the market should operate (Fligstein 2001: 76). Successful coalition building is associated with the degree to which actors deploy their ‘social skill’:

[Social skill is] the ability of actors to induce cooperation in other actors in order to produce, contest, or reproduce a given set of rules. The skill required to induce cooperation is to imaginatively identify with the mental states of others in order to find collective meanings that motivate other actors. Social skill entails utilising a set of methods to induce cooperation from one's own group and other groups. Skilled social actors interpret the actions of others in the field, and on the basis of the position of their group, use their perception of current opportunities or constraints, to attain cooperation. (Fligstein 1997: 11)

In other words actors ability to deploy skill is contingent on having knowledge about the current condition of the field (i.e. formal laws and informal practices), and the location of different groups. It also involves understanding the different strategic actions that will ‘make sense given the objective conditions’ (Fligstein 1997: 2).

Methods

A well-cited discussion paper entitled Sustainable Agriculture: A viable alternative (Fritz & Wynen 1987) reveals the high levels of success Sandy Fritz achieved in federating a national organic network. A great challenge was to find data that could illuminate the key strategies deployed by Fritz, and the degree to which she found resonance with the several organisations targeted. The small amount of research on this subject presented the
task of locating and accessing pre-computer age documents, which were archived in several sites around the country. This paper uses data collected from state library archives in NSW and South Australia. The main limitation has been that at times, the data gathered is thin on fine grain detail about Fritz’s particular strategies. The aim here then, is to offer a first cut reading of Fritz’s general strategies, and to point to a path for future inquiry.

The analysis began with a book chapter co-written by Fritz (Fritz & Wynen 2007), entitled ‘NASAA and Organic Agriculture in Australia’. This chapter gave broad insight into how the formation of the national association was pivotal to the development of the organic industry. It also oriented me to the key actors Fritz interacted with at the time. The chapter cited a number of key documents that I followed up, the most important being Fritz’s original proposal. This document was published in several journals, magazines, and also presented by Fritz at organic conferences and festivals in the early 1980s. Along with the book chapter, both documents were pivotal in orienting me to Fritz’s background, her key aims, strategies and targets. To follow Fritz’s subsequent actions, and gauge the reactions of those she attempted to mobilise, I analysed the journals and newsletters of two key organizations – The Soil Association of South Australia, and The Henry Doubleday Research Association of Australia.

Findings
The social location of Sandy Fritz

The data suggests that Sandy Fritz was socially located at the intersection of several key institutions, enabling her access, knowledge, and social connections in relation to the local and overseas organic movement. Fritz was an official office bearer in The Henry Doubleday Research Association (HDRA) in Sydney. Affiliated with the UK organisation of the same name, the HDRA was formed in 1970 as the first major Australian organic organisation, gaining over 800 individual members by the early 1980s. Its main goal was to ‘encourage organic gardening and research … and to promote lifestyles that are in harmony with the environment’ (HDRA 1984a). The association’s practices were wide in scope. They offered members access to a quarterly newsletter, seed bank, lending library, bookshop and a scientific committee that held experiments and offered advice (HDRA, 1984). Between 1983 and 1988, Fritz oscillated within the organisation, holding the key positions of scientific advisor, treasurer, publicist, and committee member.

During this time, Fritz had also undertaken and completed her thesis on how a national organisation could further the collective interests of different organic groups in Australia. She had identified that in the early 1980s organic agriculture held significance with two broad groups of individuals. The first were farmers that had experienced the negative affects of chemical based agriculture, either to their own health or that of their produce or livestock. These individuals had adopted non-chemical based methods as a way of solving these health issues (Fritz & Wynen 2007: 227). Conacher & Conacher (1986: 124) provide some context here by reporting that in 1983, between 10-25 percent of
farmers had tested positive to pesticide poisoning. Fritz & Wynen (2007: 227) describe
the second set of individuals as gardening and farming groups that were using methods
generally in line with organic, some of which did not recognise themselves as practising
under this label. These organisations were highly specialised and geographically specific
to either a particular state or local region. One typical example was the Soil Association
in South Australia. It was founded in 1975 with the specific aim of promoting the
interconnection between the health of South Australian soil, and the health of South
Australian plants, animals and humans (The Living Soil, 1981).

At this time, both sets of groups were geographically fragmented and largely unaware of
each other (Fritz & Wynen 2007: 227). Fritz began approaching specific stakeholders
within these groups, offering a detailed proposal for a national umbrella organisation, and
requesting their initial feedback. She also attempted to reach individuals by publishing
proposals in permaculture journals, organic groups’ newsletters, and presenting at
sustainable agriculture conferences and festivals around Australia (Fritz & Wynen 2007:
228).

**Framing Problems and Forming Group Boundaries**

Fritz’s proposal weaved a narrative that was constituted by two parts. The first appealed
to the philosophical core that all groups had in common: that mainstream agriculture was
inevitably unsustainable, as its reliance on chemicals posed serious long and short-term
health risks to the environment, humans and animals (Fritz 1984). By emphasising this
point, Fritz marked boundaries around the wide set of unconnected groups, giving them a

clear reason why they all shared a similar cause:

Although the idea [for a national network] originally centred on organic agriculture, it is
obvious that many other agriculture practices share the same ideals: to produce food in a
way that is non-polluting, regenerative to the soil and conserves energy and resources …
therefore I suggest we consider a network that would engulf us all … [which] would
include permaculture groups, bio-dynamic agriculture association[s], organic farming
and gardening societies, soil associations, ecological or biological farmers and others.
(Fritz 1984a)

The second part of the narrative contended that mainstream agriculture would continue to
have dominance over farmers and governments (and thus continue causing health
problems), unless a national coalition emerged, that offered concrete alternatives to
farmers, and gave guidance (and applied pressure) to the state over specific organic
issues.

Framing Solutions

Fritz proposed two key strategies. One was the building of an internal problem-solving
network for all organic stakeholders, the other was to form a national lobby that initiated
and instituted dialogue with relevant federal government departments (Fritz 1984a). The
first of these strategies – to combat the lack of information on organic practices – was
seen as being essential to both mainstream farmers wishing to convert, but also current
organic farmers that were unconnected from each other, and largely going it alone. Fritz
proposed an information clearinghouse that would database the knowledge and
experiences of organic farmers. Eventually members could request ‘information on any
problem relating to organic agriculture or gardening (either practices or policies)’ (Fritz
The idea would be to provide a service that drew on the available sources, and also referred farmers to get advice from appropriate persons.

The second strategy was to open dialogue between the state bodies and the organic sector. At the time there was no relationship between these two spheres. As such, no capital support or state based research on organics had been undertaken. Fritz proposed that the new association would systematically identify market structures that caused organic farmers disadvantage, and articulate solutions to the relevant state decision makers. One example Fritz cited was that farmers who used the ‘recommended chemical approach’ had access to a low interest loan of 4.5 percent, as opposed to organic farmers that were forced to take commercial loans at 15 percent (Fritz 1984a).

**Mobilising Action**

The key strategy Fritz adopted to elicit cooperation between groups, was to assure them that regionalism mattered. It was argued that each group’s autonomy was the pivotal characteristic that would enable a national organisation to achieve its goals (Fritz 1984a). A national organisation ‘in no way threatens the independent activities of individual societies or their communication systems (i.e. newsletters, meetings etc.),’ argued Fritz. ‘It merely, but significantly, joins them in communication amongst one another’ (Fritz 1984b). Her rationale was that each state and local region had its own unique environment, issues, and population, and as such, the knowledge and connections housed within the different groups was of great importance. On the other hand, though, she also
argued that these organisations currently being disconnected from each other, lacked the lobbying power to push their main goal: to change ‘the direction of how food is produced here [in Australia]’ (Fritz 1984b).

Setting the Agenda

Fritz began to hold a series of workshops in different states, many of which piggybacked several local organic festivals and conferences. At each event, Fritz invited stakeholders to engage in workshops where a dialogue was opened about the boundaries within which a possible association could practice. The two broad topics covered were the structure the national organisation should take, and the lobbying of the state. At the workshops, participants were ‘asked to support (or not support) the proposal, to make suggestions on how it should function, and possibly elect officers to create the new organisation’ (The Living Soil 1984b). According to the Soil Association of South Australia’s newsletter *The Living Soil*, Fritz’s proposal was highly successful in finding resonance:

> The proposed association will almost certainly go ahead with or without the support of the Soil Association of SA. Our best option is to support its good work, for the benefit of organic farmers and gardeners, the environment and the community, making whatever contribution we feel appropriate about how it should function, finance itself, what problems it must address, and what affiliations it should have … There will always be a need for state and regional organisations, because Departments of Agriculture exist at a state level, as does labelling legislation. Also, climactic and edaphic problems require local knowledge and solutions. A national organisation should strengthen local groups by keeping them informed, sharing knowledge and skills ... [and] consolidating state advances at a national level. (The Soil Association 1984b)

The HDRA also supported Fritz’s proposal. The statement of support was interesting; as they saw the project as being something they had attempted a decade earlier:
Sandy Fritz, who came onto our committee at the [1984] AGM, has picked up an idea … regarding a national organisation of organic groups to allow stronger lobbying of politicians, stronger publicity of issues important to us … Henry supports the general concept, but it is ironic how the wheel turns. I think HDRA was the first substantial organic group in Australia, rapidly forming branches in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. Before long, the Brisbane and Perth branches had decided they wanted autonomy, and changed their names to the Brisbane Organic Growers Group, and the Western Australian Organic Growers, and HDRA has in reality contracted to being a Sydney-based NSW group. (HDRA 1984: 3)

The Formation of NASAA

Fritz was now seeking to connect the HDRA breakaway groups from Brisbane and Western Australian with the other state-based groups. A report in the Soil Association of South Australia’s newsletter, gives insight into how successful her workshops had been in orienting the actions of all targeted organisations to the collective project:

Last year, discussion around Australia about the problems of agriculture and the promotion of organic practices led to the development of a steering committee. The steering committee was fully formed in December 1984 when South Australia elected 2 delegates to join Tasmania, NSW, ACT, Victoria and Western Australia. Since that time, it has been the job of the committee to draft a framework for a national association, which would promote better farming in Australia … Delegates have been busy outlining ideas and exchanging viewpoints and information by correspondence, with each other and with co-ordinator Sandy Fritz. (The Living Soil 1985)

The structure of the steering committee reflected the regionalism promised in the proposal. The states formed their own separate councils where each of the organic groups within that region were given equal voting rights regardless of their size. This meant that despite HDRA having 800 members, it only had one vote on the state council, the same as the Hawkesbury Ecological Farming Group that had only 30 members. According to a message from the president of the HDRA, the reason was to ‘keep up the momentum of recent events’ (1984: 2). In 1986, the steering committee had finalised and agreed upon a constitutional framework, and in the next year the National Association for Sustainable
Agriculture (NASAA) was formally inaugurated. At that time Fritz had mobilised ‘about 30 organisations, with a total of 5600 members’ (Wynen & Fritz 2008: 229).

Conclusion

The metaphor of the social movement has been useful in gaining a first cut understanding of the broad actions that led to the initial orienting of unconnected actors toward a recognisable national organic field. It is clear from the evidence that Sandy Fritz exhibited enough social skill to make ‘sense of a particular situation and produce shared meaning for others and bring about cooperation’ (Fligstein 2007). Missing though is fine-grained details on the specific issues Fritz came up against (i.e. oppositional coalitions), and how she deployed her social skills to negotiate around such obstacles as they arose. Also missing is a more detailed understanding of how her position in the field informed her social skills. By fleshing out both these points, we would gain a deeper understanding of the micro-foundations of market construction, and the way individuals negotiate their way around social structures in a dynamic fashion. Gaining such knowledge is possible through qualitative interviews with both Fritz and individuals from the stakeholder organisations she mobilised. The outcome is likely to further bolster the economic sociologist’s case that markets are the outcome of socially negotiated interactions, not haphazard rational exchange.
References


