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Thesis Prospectus

Organic Farming in France: À la mode or a mode of life?

In the spring of 2012 in Dr. Anne Quinney's French 304 class, we watched a documentary by Jean-Paul Jaud entitled *Nos Enfants Nous Accuseront* or *Food Beware: The French Organic Revolution*. The objective of the film is to illuminate the risks associated with eating non-organic food and the benefits of organic food. It is set primarily in Barjac, Gard, a region in southern France, where the small city has completely converted its central cafeteria to organic food. Therefore, the school children, the elderly, and some disabled who are all provided meals from this canteen eat entirely organic meals. The mayor of Barjac started this move because he wanted to encourage the citizens of the town, particularly the children, to eat more healthily. The documentary also includes scenes from conferences at UNESCO in Paris and testimonials from various farmers, organic and "conventional" (I will be using terms such as this and "traditional" to convey farming that includes, to varying degrees, the use of chemicals, pesticides, non-natural fertilizers, etc.).

After viewing the documentary in class, Dr. Quinney expressed that she would be willing to help any student interested in developing this into a thesis. This immediately seemed appealing to me because I have always been attentive to environmental causes. Since then I have been researching and observing the French disposition towards organic farming, including during my time abroad in Angers and Bras d'Asse, Provence where I worked on a small organic farm. That being said,

the topic that I will be researching is whether organic farming in France seems to simply be a fad or a small-scale group, or if it will continue to grow and become a larger and more permanent part of French daily life.

A very large percentage of French workers and land is devoted to agriculture, even in its developed state. Also, food has been a great source of national pride and identity for centuries, especially in the modern world where so many nations are industrially progressed. French people readily identify with their high quality of well-sourced food and its balance in taste and health. Because organic food is very frequently distinguished as being of superior taste and health quality, it is closely linked to French national and cultural identity.

The primary theme of *Food Beware* is food's connection to health, and this is a vastly important subtopic of organic agriculture in general that I propose to research. It is not only being more and more frequently examined in terms of nutritional benefit and maintaining a balanced diet, but it is highly promoted as an alternative to traditional food because of the chemical ramifications that are being linked to traditional food. The farmers' testimonials in the documentary often relate tragic stories of loved family members, oftentimes children, who are afflicted with various types of cancers that take a serious, if not fatal, toll on the individual.

There is, however, opposition to the organic movement. In many instances it is not financially feasible for many consumers and only the wealthier members of society can afford it. Some also view it as an endeavor that is not worthwhile because of its stringent time and financial requirements, claiming that efforts would be better spent to improve the traditional methods of farming.

Provided this context, my question aims to provide a basis of where France's organic agriculture stands today, how it came to be, and where it seems to be headed. The primary goal of my research is to determine the future projections of the movement because most of the data that I have already come across is either strictly on what has already happened or is propaganda promoting the consumption of organic food. I do not intend to argue for or against organic food but instead plan to simply analyze factual determinants and its predicted future. While many articles and sources that I have found already and will continue to study are highly biased because organic farming is oftentimes a moral topic (by moral I mean that many people encourage organic farming in order to maintain traditional French values or improve the overall wellbeing of their community, which are rather abstract concepts that are difficult to argue for in factual and concrete evidence), I endeavor to maintain as objective of a stance as possible that provides a neutral interpretation of data.

In order to examine this topic, I will continue researching various aspects of organic farming. I will initially examine what reasons promote French citizens to produce and consume organic products. I think that devoting a portion of my research to the French people's interests in this domain is very important because food, its origins and its development, is a crucial and common point of interest for many French people. This aspect contains various reasons, such as health concerns, environmental protection, and higher quality of food. This will also include looking at movements to promote organic farming and leaders of those movements, such as those in *Food Beware* and José Bové, a headstrong leader in the movement to

maintain traditional food integrity. I will also include responses from an organic farmer that I worked with during my time abroad via the program WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) and her motivations for organic production.

In order to provide a balanced portrayal of the arguments for and against the movement, I will also describe and interpret the points that are made that counter the development of organic farming. I intend to do this to ensure an impartial investigation, not simply provide another work of propaganda to the body of work that already exists.

I will next relate the French legislation concerning organic farming. It is a highly contentious political issue (for example, it is a major concern for the Europe Ecology-The Greens political party). France has very strict regulations, and I will research the progression of these regulations, how they stand today, and what they mean for everyday farmers, i.e. do they tend to help or hinder these farmers and their conversion to and maintenance of organic farms. The fundamental organization that manages the criteria for organic farms is L'Agence Bio, which I will describe and analyze as well.

The section that I intend to be more significantly quantitative than the others will demonstrate the trends that French organic farming has already taken, and how it has developed over the years. This will involve statistics such as the number of hectares of farmland devoted to organic farming and what percentage of farmland it comprises. It will also involve the economic directions that it has developed, such as the cost of starting an organic farm, the usual rate of return, and the manner in which consumers devote their income to organic purchases. I will look further into

this by seeing if it is primarily certain areas of France or certain products that have shown stronger trends in being produced organically. Also in my research that I have conducted thus far, I have found many articles that list and graph farming trends in various European Union countries, so I will more than likely include figures such as these in order to provide a frame of reference for France's development of its organic agriculture, economically and physically.

Some of the primary sources that I will use include the *Food Beware* documentary, a collection of articles by the OECD (the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development) entitled *Organic Agriculture: Sustainability, Markets and Policies*, and various articles from academic and newspaper sources. I will also relate experiences and opinions from my WWOOF employer in order to simply provide a more personal and real life perspective on the matter that affects every French citizen.

Although my probable lack of access to direct French sources, statistics, and testimonies will hinder my in-depth research, I hope to refine and truly delve into this topic that has current and topical ramifications in order to provide a well-informed prediction of the future of French organic agriculture.

L'Agence Bio. <http://www.agencebio.org/>.

Jaud, Jean-Paul. *Nos Enfants Nous Accuseront/ Food Beware: The French Organic Revolution*. J+B Séquences. 2008.

Organic Agriculture: Sustainability, Markets and Policies. OECD publishing. CABI Publishing. 2003.