For any movement wishing to change society, there exist three main options. One is to seize power and enforce conformity with its policies and values. The second is to change the existing culture or system from the inside; and the third is to establish a parallel infrastructure in the interstices of that system, ready to emerge as an alternative when it no longer functions adequately. The British organic movement has since the 1980s strongly inclined to the second option: so much so that the idea of the movement being radical can seem at times to have been obscured by an emphasis on “brands” and the adoption of consumerist language.

In Patrick Noble’s view, this second option has proved both a failure and a betrayal of the organic movement’s principles. Only the third option, he believes, can offer a sustainable future, while ensuring that the organic movement remains connected to its historical roots. While it would be claiming too much to say that Noble sketches out a potential alternative, he does serve to remind us of features of the organic movement which have perhaps taken second place to retail issues.

“Those who would change systems from within almost always become changed themselves, while the system continues unchanged,” writes Noble (p.82). Here is the crux, and Noble is not the first to have identified it. Twenty years ago, Lawrence Woodward felt obliged to admit that the mainstream was changing the organic movement more than the movement was changing the mainstream. He had once believed that the movement must enter the mainstream in order to show a sense of responsibility, but by 1993 felt that his fears had proved more perceptive than his optimism. Others shared his unease: in the pages of New Farmer and Grower, Julian Rose, Colin Johnson and David Urwin all held out for an uncompromising ethical approach. Johnson and his partner Arabella Melville felt that the organic movement had become part of the status quo, merely offering a different method of agriculture; while Urwin pointed out that the concepts of ecology and holism implied not just agricultural, but social and economic change.
Patrick Noble identifies a contemporary example of the same tensions in his reference to an article about the Soil Association’s Trade Consultant Finn Cottle, who spent more than twenty years working for major supermarket groups. According to Farmers’ Weekly (19 January 2012), Ms. Cottle attacked critics of supermarkets as elitist and defended “big business” as the only means by which urban consumers could buy good food; while Andrew Burgess of Produce World said that the organic industry must become more “grown-up in its arguments” and accept that “working with big business did not mean the ethical principles behind organic had to be lost”.

Anyone with a sense of the movement’s history can only react with incredulity. As Noble reminds us, the organic movement is part of a cultural tradition whose earlier representatives include John Ruskin and William Morris, the anarchist Kropotkin, and the Guild Socialists. One might add that forty years ago the Soil Association’s President was the author of Small is Beautiful. Opposition to big business was a constant theme of organic writings. The powerful and complacent, when criticised, frequently react by telling their critics to “grow up”, but there would be no organic movement today had its pioneers compromised with the powerful chemical industries which began to flourish in the 1940s.

It is important, too, to remember that the organic movement was given fresh impetus by the 1973-74 oil crisis, which demonstrated the vulnerability of the Western world’s energy provision. As Noble points out, the power of supermarkets today depends entirely on oil – or some substitute being found which can keep the system lurching along.

For Noble, this system is a fantasy which only the reckless use of accumulated energy reserves makes possible: “The extra-ordinary powers given us by fossilised life have presented the illusion that we are not a part of nature” (p.142). As our profligacy reaps its harvest of collapsing infrastructure, we shall need, urgently, to recover the skills which writers like H. J. Massingham, or advocates of self-sufficiency like John Seymour, celebrated. And we shall need to make a civilised transition to a convivial society in which we learn the problems and pleasures of dealing with an often recalcitrant natural world.

Patrick Noble apologises in a Postscript for having concentrated more on what we are losing than on possible solutions. I hope that in a future book he will start offering some viable alternatives, given the scale of the problems which will hit us as the existing system breaks down. In the meantime, it is important that A Potent
Nostalgia should provoke debate in The Organic Grower and other organic publications about the path which the movement must take.

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