Discussion 0: History of Organic Agriculture (List the appropriate discussion here)
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Article Summary:
• The history of organic farming can be divided into four phases: 1) Concept Development (1900-1940), 2) Polarization (1940-1978), 3) Recognition (1979-1990), 4) Accommodation (1990-present).
• Sir Albert Howard (1873-1947) is widely recognized as the father of organic agriculture. He developed the Indore method of composting and “the law of return” based on his work in India, the West Indies, and Britain.
• Sir Howard’s view of soil nutrition was based around the recycling of animal and vegetable matter including human wastes. He also was an early researcher of mycorrhizal fungi/plant mutualism.
• The term “Organic Farming” was first introduced by Walter Northbourne, a follower of Rudolph Steiner’s biodynamic agriculture. Sir Howard was skeptical of the mystical basis of biodynamics.
• Sir Howard influenced the Lady Eve Balfour and J.I. Rodale who became further proponents of organic agriculture in Britain and the U.S. respectively.
• Lady Balfour began the Haughley experiment in 1939, the first side by side comparison of “conventional” and organic agriculture. She also published the book the “Living Soil” and was a cofounder of the Soil Society, Britain’s leading organic certifier.
• J.I. Rodale founded both the Rodale publishing house and Rodale institute in the U.S. which popularized organic gardening and farming in the U.S.
• Polarization between organic and conventional agriculture occurred in part because of Liebig and other’s work that demonstrated that inorganic nutrients are the most available to plants and was also fostered by Howard and Rodale’s militant stance on organics
• Recognition of organics began in Europe in part due to IFOAM conferences featuring Lady Balfour. Recognition in the United states began in the 1980’s but really took off once 3rd party certification developed a fast growing market for organic products.
• The National Organic Program was originally formed in 1990 but the national standards were not drafted until 2002. These standards forbid the use of GMO’s, Sewage, and irradiation after massive public outcry
• The current status of organics in the US is that of a legally defined label for commodities. This stands in contrast to the original organic ethos as envisioned by it’s creators.
Discussion Questions:

1. In what respects do current NOP organic standards meet the philosophy of Sir Albert Howard? In what respects do they not?

2. How might the word “Organic” lead to misunderstandings about what constitutes organic agriculture? Is this something that continues today?

3. How plausible is the reintroduction of “humanure practices” in modern agriculture? What are some possible constraints?

4. How might agricultural pests be viewed as “professors”? Does this view hold any value for modern agricultural practices?

Overall Discussion Question:

1. The roots of organic agriculture are strongly tied to soil tilth and health as an overall measure of system health and this has been extended to the relative need for pest management. How appropriate is this relative to different production systems (i.e. field crops, vegetables, fruit production)?