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# Is organic farming unsustainable? Analysis of the debate about the organic label conventionalisation

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## **Abstract**

“Conventionalisation” hangs like the sword of Damocles over organic farming. Raised by certain agrobiologists, the threat has been examined by researchers who have attempted (with little success) to measure any shift in how organic standards are put into practice. This article takes up the issue, but instead of seeking to make explicit what is meant by organic (a difficult task in light of the variety of interpretations), as earlier research has done, it seeks to enter into the controversy surrounding the development and sustainability of the movement. This investigation illustrates the opposition between two regimes of action, each based on very different visions of the acceptable use of the AB label; the first tends to reduce organics to a set of regulatory restrictions imposed by the label, while the other sees these restrictions as a reductive and insufficient framework; for this regime, organic production is more than a set of restrictions; it is a “philosophy” or “spirit” guiding a broad examination of the production process and its result. Nevertheless, despite their disagreements, the two regimes are also in close and mutually-beneficial interaction. Two contradictory characteristics of organic production emerge, thus ensuring its sustainability: its capacity to spread through economic networks thanks to a more rigid framework, and its flexibility, enabling it continually to redefine itself and adapt to new situations.

Keywords: Sustainability; conventionalisation; label erosion; certification; objectivation; organic label; bio label.

Index: conventionalisation; objectivation; label AB; label erosion

## **Introduction**

In all likelihood, the notion of sustainability owes its success to its ambiguity. Indeed, how do we know what is sustainable and what is not? Is there a threshold beyond which a condition or an approach may be considered sustainable? Moreover, examining the endurance of an object forces us to clarify its nature: what is organic production, which developments and adaptations can be considered tolerable and which unacceptable? How can we respond to questions such as these? Does the notion of sustainability even have a meaning?

Logic ought to incite us quickly to turn the page; prudence stresses the fact that it drives a great many conversations and activities, fills numerous pages and occupies a large number of people. Surely we would already have grown weary of the notion if it were devoid of meaning. Following the counsel of prudence, then, this article aims to examine how actors manage to deal with such a sensitive issue. Rather than look at sustainability in general, however (a topic too vast for a short article), we focus on certain agrobiologists’ recurrent fear that the organic label is being eroded and losing its capacity to differentiate between “conventional” and “organic” agricultural produce, and is thus impossible to sustain. In what way and why would organic production be unsustainable? What signs, evidence and facts arouse this fear?

We start by retracing the emergence of this concern, which arose among agrobiologists when the French organic label (AB<sup>1</sup>) was established to bring together a variety of approaches to better propagate agrobiology. Researchers heard this alarm and investigated its reality without reaching a conclusion - the persistence of the controversy makes one think so at least. We thus return to the actors and their debates on the matter in order to see how they manage to reconcile the two, somewhat contradictory, elements of the adaptability and durability of organics. Examining these debates allows us to show the unexpected role this fear plays in sustaining organic production.

### **Fear of the erosion of the AB label**

In 1981, French agrobiologists seeking to further promote organic production requested and obtained the authorities' recognition of farming that "does not use synthetic chemicals". In addition, organisations and private commercial brands promoting the development of organic farming found themselves being offered the possibility of having their standards specifications and "endorsements" or interpretations of organics approved, thus lending a kind of official validation to their approach.

Nature & Progrès, the first ratified standards specifications, did not establish itself as *the* organic standards specifications. In parallel to the approval of the 14 standards specifications and endorsements existing at the time, and in order to avoid a dispersal of the organic movement in myriad different specifications, a single French label was negotiated.

This led all those involved in the organic movement to seek a consensual definition essentially<sup>2</sup> based on the rejection of the technical innovation of "chemical" agronomy. Since Fritz Haber, the chemical industry has developed a large number of solutions to the "problems" of plant growth, disease, pests and competition with weeds. The effectiveness of pesticides, fungicides and herbicides increases yields and matches the changing lifestyles of farmers, who also want to be able to take holidays, for example. However, this technical success is also transforming farming, and depends on a reconstruction – ever more controllable and thus increasingly "artificial" - of biological processes, isolating and reducing them to a food production process with very clearly predefined characteristics.

The resulting regulations of the AB label<sup>3</sup> with which organic actors seek to promote alternative farming mainly consist in the prohibition of synthetic fertilisers and treatments. It monopolises the denomination "organic" and has been a great success. Of the 14 pre-existing private standards specifications and charters for organic production, only two remain: Nature & Progrès<sup>4</sup> for organic farming ("in limbo" after the departure

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<sup>1</sup> AB stands for Agriculture Biologique, organic agriculture.

<sup>2</sup> The 1991 European regulation (R CEE n° 2092/91) ruling the certified European organic production encourages also biodiversity, pluriannual crop rotations and the association between agriculture and breeding.

<sup>3</sup> The AB label is combined with CCREPAB F, the French standards specifications that are stricter than the European organic label, especially with regard to livestock farming.

<sup>4</sup> In order to be completely precise, one should say 3, as the SIMPLES standards specifications focusing on gathering medicinal plants has also endured. In France, Nature & Progrès and Déméter are the two main organisations defending organic production; they offer private standards specifications outside the public French AB label that became European after the abolition of European subsidiarity for organic

of many of its members, both producers and consumers), and D  m  ter for biodynamic production.

However, alarm is growing in the shadow of this success. Producers and those running organisations have pointed out the threat looming in the absence of the alternative socio-economic dimension in the label's regulations, and the recourse, voluntary or not, of certain producers to the usual marketing channels:

“We could say that the institutionalisation of organics has now marked its territory (or its objectives); the organic movement is currently in a phase of “market takeover”: some people would like to restrict its development to a copy-&-paste of conventional food production and distribution methods.” (Harrouch 2003): 5

In particular, they point to supermarket distribution, the pressure on productivity and the prices imposed on producers, which will, in their opinion, only lead to an erosion of organic standards. According to them, this is the same economic pressure that caused the recent transformation and excesses of conventional farming and against which they rebelled: the truncated interpretations of organics, limiting it to the label's purely technical regulatory requirements, are in the process of taking the movement in exactly the same direction.

### **The contribution of research to the problem of the label's erosion**

Researchers also find these developments disturbing. Two articles published in the same issue of the journal *Sociologia Ruralis*, with very different reasoning but often cited together (Buck, Getz, and Guthman 1997) (Tovey 1997), both conclude in the impossible mission of the organic movement.

Buck and his co-authors (1997) observe the rapprochement between conventional and organic farming in California. To explain it, they cite the market economy mechanism itself and the shortcomings of the barriers set up by organic stakeholders to this very profitable segment of the market. “Conventional” producers, attracted by this organic production mode, are converting and bringing with them a rationalisation of production with large amounts of capital to throw around. The comfortable margins they enjoy allow them to put pressure on prices and also lead to an increase in the value of land, which is gradually driving out the pioneers of the organic movement who, generally, do not have much capital. Moreover, consumers are more interested in the qualities specific to organic produce (health, environment, taste, etc.) than questions of organisation and market access. They therefore put up little or no resistance to the restructuring of organic production and the abandoning of the alternative, sustainable socio-economic principles that comprised the foundations of the original organic movement.

In the second article, Tovey highlights an “institutional” mechanism: the Irish authorities are using European subsidies for agri-environmental measures to encourage the development of organic production on the sole basis of the agronomic principles of organic certification, ignoring any socio-economic goal. They are thus bringing about a growth in organic production that outflanks the initial, dissenting socio-economic vision, replacing it with a mere variant of classic agronomy that uses natural products instead of chemical treatments and fertilisers.

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certification. The two organisations bring together producers, distributors and consumers while the FNAB (France's National Federation of Organic Farming) is exclusively a union of certified AB producers.

Far from being unanimously accepted, these articles sparked a lively debate about what is known as “conventionalisation”, the name given to the implacable logic of the erosion of organic production and its attendant identified mechanisms of “appropriation”, “commodification” and “bifurcation”. In fact, the idea of a capitalist logic of capturing value evoked by Buck, Getz and Guthman is reversed in the name of capitalism’s capacity to incorporate its own contradictions in order to continue its development and thus escape from its own deadlocks (Coombes and Campbell 1998). Guthman (2004) persists by evoking the flaws of organic labelling and its inability to impose an organic quality that is not only agronomic but also socio-economic<sup>5</sup>. In early 2001, a special issue of *Sociologia Ruralis* (Michelsen 2001) was published, devoted to “conventionalisation”. It broadened the debate which, until then, had been confined to economics, in order to set “conventionalisation” against a series of logics and competing social forces. In an attempt to move beyond disciplinary confrontation, it also provided the contribution of empirical studies which led to a series of case studies (Coombes and Campbell 1998) (Dantsis, Loumou and Giourga 2009) and “measurements” of conventionalisation (Hall and Mogyorody 2001) (Lockie and Halpin, 2005).

These case studies demonstrate that the erosion is not equally severe everywhere. In certain countries such as New Zealand, “genuine” organic production seems to be resisting alongside an industrialised and watered-down version. The authors of these studies therefore contest the universality of the erosive forces, which, until then, had been identified but not explained.

As for measuring conventionalising forces, this is not without its own problems. In order to appreciate the effect of the transformation of organic production, the authors compare the “values” of the new organic farmers, particularly those who convert, with those of the pioneers. However, in making this comparison, they are obliged to consider the pioneers as fossilised dinosaurs, the unanimous (and particularly inflexible) bearers of a testimony of another era. As Best (2008): 104 notes, following the publications of Darnhofer (2006): 2 and Tovey (1997), we need a more precise definition of conventionalisation. At the moment, it is impossible to distinguish that which, in the changes observed, is part of an appropriation of organic production by conventional production from what is specific to the development of the organic movement and its continual adaptation to new and changing situations.

In view of these difficulties, Darnhofer et al. (2010) suggest comparing practices with what the authors consider to be *the* definition of organic. The article is thus based on the four principles listed by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM undated) as forming the “roots” of organic farming – and follows the adjustment of practices to these principles by means of sets of indicators of practices.

However, the bias of the choice of the IFOAM definition overlooks the historical dimension of any drafting of principles. It also completely disregards the diversity of interpretations of organics, particularly all those that do not recognise themselves in the IFOAM definition, or find these principles inadequate. The IFOAM, which is supposed to support the international development of organic production, is based on consensual criteria that exclude, in particular, alternative socio-economic dimensions; prohibiting supermarket distribution is not, therefore, one of the criteria selected in the article even

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<sup>5</sup> Guthman’s argument is very similar to the fear of “market takeover” mentioned above.

though this is a crucial point for many organic militants, defenders or promoters involved<sup>6</sup>.

Another path explored by more “comprehensive” human sciences takes the diversity of actors’ interpretations more seriously. The researchers following this path attempt to analyse conventionalisation not as a set of hidden forces imposed upon actors, but as the fruit of divergences of interpretation of organic production and its sustainability. The theory of conventions on which many of these studies are based (Murdoch and Miele 1999; Campbell and Liepins 2001; Rosin and Campbell 2009) transforms “conventionalisation” and organics’ erosion by the rationalised agricultural system into a play of oppositions between ideological tenets or value conventions. The interpretation of organic as a “value” turns it into the exact opposite of earlier studies (which attempted to list the criteria to enable its objective content to be grasped), into a simple, subjective construction. Consequently, the threat of the erosion of the label becomes nothing but performative autosuggestion<sup>7</sup>.

However, the actors do not only live in a realm of ideas that dictate their laws to the plants, fields and annual turnover regardless of their day-to-day experience of them. Rather than continuing along one of the two previous objective or subjective paths, we have chosen to come back to the actors and the problem they point out. Unlike earlier studies, we did not confine ourselves to the “values” or “ideologies” as subjective moral principles affixed onto the actors’ experience of the world. Following in the tradition of socio-technical studies (Latour 2007) or pragmatic studies (James 1996), we sought to define the threat sensed by some through the actors’ experience of it, the visible signs of it, the accusations they make against some of their colleagues and the responses made to these accusations, in order to understand the difference between “good” organics and the “bad” organics that threatens it. We thus carried out a pragmatic analysis that sees organics, like its objectivity, as the result of the collective – but not necessarily shared – experience.

The analysis presented in this article is partly based on a project carried out for the Ministry of Ecology by a team of researchers - Barrey, Blanchemanche, Charpigny, Floux, Hennion and Teil - on the environmental quality of wine (Teil et al. 2011). The study devoted to organic production is based on over 70 interviews with organic or biodynamic vintners, certified (62) or not certified (10), in the Val de Loire, Jura and Languedoc Roussillon regions, as well as people working for the authorities and technical centres in charge of organic production, organic distributors, consumers, journalists, certification bodies, etc. (See tables 1 and 2).

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<sup>6</sup> We should also note that, like “organic-formula”, the article reduces organic farming to indicators of practices, which alarmed organic adepts accuse of being the very cause of the threat of organics’ erosion.

<sup>7</sup> The ensuing problem is well-known; it is impossible to predict which of the “objective” or “subjective” forces will lead to a conventionalisation of a given label, and therefore impossible to decide on the correct preventative measures.

| Field                  | N°  |
|------------------------|-----|
| Production             | 115 |
| Sales & Distribution   | 36  |
| Central Administration | 12  |
| Technical & Research   | 14  |
| Farming Union          | 7   |
| Quality Certification  | 15  |
| Media                  | 10  |
| Catering Industry      | 3   |
| Consumers              | 13  |
| Phytosanitary Industry | 6   |
| Total                  | 231 |

Table 1. Division of interviews by field

| Region               | N°  |
|----------------------|-----|
| Languedoc-Roussillon | 80  |
| Val de Loire         | 98  |
| Paris                | 51  |
| Other (Jura)         | 2   |
| Total                | 231 |

Table 2. Division of interviews by region

The detailed list of interviews is presented in the appendices. We supplemented this with 7 interviews with representatives and staff from organisations promoting organic production, and the FNAB, and four half-days of participant observation. Added to this corpus of interviews is a significant corpus of textual data bringing together various articles, journals and works, blogs and websites, research reports from public and private institutions, etc. related to environmental issues in viticulture as well as agriculture in general, since the qualifications are not limited to viticulture alone.

Our field study examined the example of viticulture and we questioned only vintners and wine grape producers. However, in most cases, the remarks made by these organic vintners are not exclusively confined to the field of wine-growing, and relate to organic production in general. Nevertheless, the application of actions correlating to their conclusions was, of course, carried out on the basis of their specific productions and, therefore, their wines. Wine is usually regarded as one organic product among others, and occasionally, on the contrary, as a specific product. In the following section, the article reproduces the connection they make or do not make between wine and organic production as a whole. Lastly, just as we use agrobiologie here in the widest, polysemous sense in line with the diversity of actors' interpretations, the notion of organic wine is also a flexible notion here. Although the INAO<sup>8</sup> has not authorised the notion of "organic wine", keeping instead "wine made from organically-grown grapes", actors constantly use the term and various private charters even outline specifications.

## The contested threat of the label's erosion

The AB label provoked debates and then rejections as soon as it was established in 1991. Initially, rejections were individual, and were then followed by a boycott by the Nature & Progrès organisation in 1995. Although the boycott had little support at the time, it has undergone a revival since 2000; the number of "boycotting" members (who apply exclusively for Nature & Progrès certification and refuse AB certification) has grown from a third to half the organisation's members in 2010. Would the truth of the threat be gradually spreading? But in that case, why are the others resisting? This section

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<sup>8</sup> INAO: Institut National de la Qualité et de l'Origine in charge of the French politics regarding the denominations of Origin.

presents the experience causing those who denounce the AB label erosion to call into question a certain exploitation of the AB label, and the response they are given.

### **The dispossession and reappropriation of organics**

Detractors dissatisfied with the label<sup>9</sup> describe the “institutionalisation” of organic production; some claim that the AB label “dispossesses” them of the vigilance they used to exercise over organic farming, how it is put into practice and its various interpretations and innovations – an impression that resurged in 2010 with the publication of the new regulations for organic production that abolish French subsidiarity<sup>10</sup>.

“...the European standards specification is a consensual text and one that, for some, sounds the alarm regarding the loss of control of the founding principles of organic farming. [...&... It] is now being discussed out of the reach of organic producers and is slipping out of our hands. It could well be doomed to lowering standards since it is based on a broad consensus, and this is even truer with the enlargement of Europe.” (Interview with Nature & Progrès organisation: 1&2<sup>11</sup>)

The members of organisations discuss the issues at stake for organic farming and good and bad practices; they make adjustments to the concept and periodically revise the standards specifications in order to take into account new experiments, interesting or undesirable innovations and so on. However, with the label, organic production is entrusted on the one hand to an independent monitoring body and, on the other, to the wisdom of those who consume organic produce, whose skill or expertise is distrusted by concerned producers. They think that consumers’ interest in organic farming is limited to banning “unnatural” chemical products and that they show little interest in standards specifications or the debates surrounding practices. Buyers “place their trust” in the label, in other words, they delegate the identification of organic produce to the label. With consumers withdrawing from the debate, the crucial discussion of what constitutes organic and how it is monitored or controlled therefore depends on a day-to-day basis on the choices and judgment of staff or members of certifying bodies<sup>12</sup>.

The interviews show two recurrent examples that highlight the absence of monitoring: productivist agriculture that only uses natural treatments, or crops grown without synthetic products but which are “soilless”. Both are seen as betraying the idea of organics while respecting the bare minimum of the label’s specifications. These two examples are cited as the epitome of organic production’s takeover by large operators or market “capitalist logic”. As the label does not present a single economic criterion, control procedures are regarded as incapable of preventing the perversion of organics that they cause.

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<sup>9</sup> This is a critique of the AB label made by militants from organisations, especially Nature & Progrès, and organic producers who are often also militants in organisations. To avoid the text becoming too cumbersome, we have not repeated this with each phrase.

<sup>10</sup> The subsidiarity rule allowed each EU member state to adopt stricter specifications than the EU common regulation; the new one (CE) N°834/2007 prohibits this ‘overruling’ and forces all EU countries to adopt the same EU organic regulation.

<sup>11</sup> Figures indicate the page numbers of interviews, all transcribed in a standardised format.

<sup>12</sup> This denomination includes all that could be called the “sphere of control” with its monitoring commissions, advisory councils, etc., and which actors often call “monitoring” or “control” without further precision.



These interpretations of organic production are often qualified as “organic-formula”; like a formula, they are based on the preestablished list of the allowed organic techniques but lack the “spirit” of the organic movement. The adhesion to this spirit sustains a wider, contextualised analysis that, with the aim of developing an alternative agriculture which is durable because protected from harmful market forces, reintroduces the socio-economic dimensions.

In anticipation of the apprehended slipping of standards, the two organisations, Déméter and Nature & Progrès, have revised their standards specifications, charters and guiding principles<sup>13</sup>. Agronomic restrictions have been tightened and the principles of sustainable farming - from the point of view of nature as much as from a human perspective - have been made explicit. Difficult (if not impossible) to translate or define with testable socio-economic criteria, these principles are written into the charters as farmers' engagements monitored by an internal participatory guarantee system: the organisation's members themselves guarantee the vigilance of the interpretation, application and engagement of the organic or biodynamic producer or transformer by the other members of the organisation.

“Biodynamic production requires that one feels strongly connected to the essence of biodynamic methods, principles and aims. To this end, it is necessary to fathom natural processes through observation, thought processes and perception. An ever-deeper understanding of connections in nature can be acquired through continual effort. Working groups in various organisations, public events, journals and books are all significant sources of help and support.

However, if someone should wish to use these standards only as one often does with laws, in other words, concerned only with the formal aspect or by seeking loopholes because it is economically advantageous, he or she would do better to practise a different type of farming. It is the mission of the Déméter France organisation, its representatives and consultants, to prevent things from taking a turn in this direction.” (Déméter 2004): 4

### **The label to spread the organic movement**

For a great many supporters, organic is a state of mind, a different way of conceiving agricultural production that is constantly under discussion in the numerous collective decision-making bodies that are set up and form the “network” of the *Fédération Nationale de l'Agriculture Biologique* (FNAB).

However, not everybody rejects the label – far from it, in fact.

For some, protecting the environment is very much a question of means and banning bad practices. For them, the main thing is that synthetic products are banned, and then farming reverts to being non-polluting and sound, respecting the environment and the consumer. In that case, the market should not be feared but rather used for an essential mission – to develop and generalise organic production. From this point of view, the label offers considerable advantages: it enables organic produce to become widespread,

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<sup>13</sup>The abolition of the French standards specifications and its replacement by European specifications caused a similar reaction with the creation of the brand “Bio Cohérence” whose standards are stricter and attempt to incorporate socio-economic criteria to prevent the “hijacking” of the organic movement.

increases its credibility and does away with rival interpretations, bringing organic produce to wherever the market reaches.

For those who support the AB label, the qualitative one-upmanship and charters to develop new socio-economic relations merely confine organic production to a “niche” reserved for the elite, the only ones able to afford the products seen as very expensive. Supporters, on the contrary, hope to contribute to the spread of the organic movement, making it “commonplace”. They scoff at their inefficient distribution channels that cause prices to rise and later at the Parisian “*bobos*” [“bourgeois Bohemians”] who hijack the organic movement in order to turn it into a luxury product with the “obvious” complicity of private organisations’ very exacting standards specifications. They roundly reject these strategies of “confinement” and, on the contrary, use every resource offered by the market to disseminate their wines or products as widely as possible. For the vintners interviewed, it is crucial to market wines with prices comparable to the others so that they do not suffer any discrimination.

The first producer we encountered during our survey had “rationalised” and “optimised” his equipment, become a wine merchant as well as producer and adapted the labelling of his wine at the request of his clients. One of his cuvees for New Zealand is called “bin” in the style of a renowned Australian wine merchant. The second producer gambled on economies of scale and set up a 220-hectare vineyard with AB certification and used biodynamic methods. Both producers supply their wines to supermarkets and sell and export at prices similar to those of other wines from the same *appellation* in order to facilitate the distribution of their products. They explained how, unlike the vast majority of organic producers, they have bowed to the demands of volume, standardisation and regularity made by supermarkets and large exporting wine merchants. In return, they benefit from the AB label’s credibility abroad and this form of distribution relieves them of the burden of marketing their products themselves.

In the 1980s, these producers were the only ones (two out of seven producers with private certification before 1990 in our sample) to denounce the “irrational fear of the market” that they saw among their colleagues, and relations were stormy at times. However, they became less of a fringe element with the arrival of new producers with organic certification who are very concerned about the environment and who, like them, are convinced that rejecting synthetic products provides a radical solution to the problem of agricultural pollution. They are therefore little engaged in the discussion ranging from agronomy in the strictest sense to the economics of agricultural production and its marketing. Relatively unconcerned about the quirks of the market economy, they are more preoccupied about managing to ensure the economic health of their businesses – an essential weapon, according to them, for expanding the organic movement.

There are, therefore, two fairly contradictory interpretations of organics emerging. In one interpretation, organics is a subject in the process of development, moving towards the goal of sustainable farming for both the environment and its inhabitants, constantly reconsidering what it actually is and continually rethinking its ends and means. In the other interpretation, organics is an object sufficiently defined by a set of practices and proscriptions. The question of monitoring remains equally crucial for both camps, as they cannot rely on consumers for any kind of vigilance; unlike the gustative quality of wines or other products, the quality of organic production cannot be directly verified by

the consumer. The seriousness of monitoring is one of the unavoidable issues when marketing and distributing organic produce.

Militants from organic organisations and partisans of the organic market do not have the same vision of how organic standards ought to be put into practice. For the first group, the label's criteria are only a minimum framework of interpretations whose "spirit" needs to be discussed. For the second group, on the contrary, the label's criteria define and guarantee organic production. The latter do not feel "dispossessed" of organics by the label, which "belongs" to no-one. This does not necessarily mean that they are merely lukewarm supporters. Organic production is a production mode they support and, like the others, hope to develop; what's more, some of them are very active in the organic community. One of the two producers in our sample launched an organic wine competition to try and improve the gustative quality of the wines, which he believed to be a handicap to development.

Together they differ less in their acceptance or rejection of the market than in the modality of the elaboration of the organics they support. For partisans of the market, organic production is the circumscribed, defined and standardised quality of an object. During production, whatever does not fall within the norm makes up part of the "other" qualities of the product and, on the contrary, is part of the producer's choice. They are therefore opposed to those who, unlike them, see in organic production a global quality whose assessment must be continually reconsidered.

### **An occasionally stormy coexistence**

Relations between advocates of the two positions are somewhat conflictual. Each reflects an interpretation of organic ("niche-organic" versus "business-organic") that casts doubt on the sincerity or effectiveness of the other's engagement. To avoid using these pejorative designations, we shall call the first group "eco-alternative organic" to stress the broad and global nature of their interpretation, and the second "label supporters" who delegate responsibility for organic identity to the label.

The eco-alternative advocates from our sample feared that the market will end up watering down or hijacking the conception of agriculture that they promote, often at the cost of great abnegation. They feel that the development of organic production has been entrusted to consumers who are generally ill-informed and lacking in engagement, and producers who may be self-serving.

They challenge the authorities who regulate the markets and their reductive vision of organic production. They cite recent events and the abolition of French subsidiarity as an illustration that the authorities consider market development as a fluid circulation of homogenous organic products, and therefore, reduced to a single label. This invariably results in bringing organic production down to the lowest common denominator, lowering standards and ignoring the broader requirements of each of the original standards specifications.

The "label supporters" reproach the eco-alternative camp for the stricter demands of their private charters, the additional costs these involve and their specialised distribution channels that risk turning organic goods into products reserved for the elite. Furthermore, this expensive organic production seems to them to be opening the door to an interpretation of organic as an increase in the quality of produce justifying a

higher premium, but an interpretation such as this can only be an obstacle in developing organic production, demanding that consumers agree to pay more for their organic produce. They therefore reiterate that, contrary to a widely-held belief, organic production does not cost more than other productions:

“...there is also the belief in consumers’ minds that in any case organic is more expensive, it’s 30% more expensive, someone decided that 30 years ago, that it’s 30% more expensive and it’s stuck regardless of the production, regardless of... and when you put 2 bottles, one organic and one not organic, next to each other and you look at the prices, generally it never works. It’s not 30% but someone decided that it was 30% more expensive and so it’s an obstacle” (Organic vintner: 4)

The eco-alternative group admits that organic produce is often – but not always! – slightly more expensive, but it should be reconsidered in a new way of conceiving consumption: less waste, greater attention paid to what is consumed, etc. – an attitude that easily compensates the extra production and marketing costs. For them, “organic” means considering not only the “definition” of organic production, but also the human and economic consequences of our actions. This comprehensive reflection should lead to a fairer distribution of wealth. The eco-alternative advocates thus defend themselves from accusations of elitism by insisting upon the politico-social combat they are engaged in to encourage everyone to think further than “my tastes”, “the price” and above all “*the label*”, as this reduction of organic is an abdication of our duty to reflect, and for them, this is a high price to pay for the fluid distribution enabling organic production to reach the entire planet. With the label “commodifying” organic production (as economists describe it), making an organic “thing” all the more successful because the label is considered “credible” and therefore not called into question, in fact, the opposite occurs. The credible label relieves consumers of their responsibility to think about the consequences of their actions and enables businesses to invent and implement organic solutions that are not organic in “spirit”, such as “soilless” organic, so-called “intensive” organic and transporting converted soil to other places to equip organic greenhouses, for example.

## **Organic - a global quality or an objectified characteristic?**

Is it possible to reconcile the “enemy brothers” or should we separate them?

“When we set a rule, we create borderline cases, and this is a problem!” a member of the FNAB told us. By “objectivising” organic production, the label opens the door to innovations that satisfy the label’s criteria but break away from the collective procedure by which the global quality of organic production is drawn up and monitored. The assessment of these innovations is entrusted to customers who delegate the scrutiny of organic production to a label that makes only a very incomplete examination of the organic quality of the product and is blind to questions of transport, water, economic organisation, ethics, justice and so on.

The eco-alternative organic camp accuses the label certified by a third party of creating the possibility of its misappropriation as it allows for a “non-engaged” use of organic production. Recourse to the label can suspend the critical interrogation of organic production – what it is, its good or bad interpretations, adjustments, etc. – to turn it into a quality determined by the criteria that designate it. The merit of the objectification of organic production is that it makes it a finite, autonomous quality, independent of place

and the person applying it. To use Latour's terms (1987), organic quality has become an "immutable mobile", something that can be appropriated by anyone and "applied" to any supporting object as long as its manufacture respects the label's criteria and restrictions. Organic production "boxed up" by a label thus acquires an existence independent of those who conceived and created it. However, the label also makes another transformation possible. While for eco-alternative organic advocates, organic is a global quality that examines the organic product as a whole (its manufacture, transport, consumption and recycling, for example), it becomes, because of the label, a circumscribed quality that can be incorporated (with a varying degree of ease) into the product's other qualities, objectified or not, anticipated or imposed by the producer/manufacturer, the buyers, or market regulations.

In their opinion, the way in which organic standards are put into practice should be subject to an *ex post* integrative assessment. It should be based on the entire process from manufacture and distribution to consumption as these all have an impact on the "organic" quality of the product, and no longer seen as a set of criteria but the ever ongoing development of an alternative to the "deadlock" of "conventional" farming.

The organic quality that emerges from this collective usage is not "something" autonomous or predefined. It is the result of multiple applications, each inseparable from the concrete situation of its use, and an interpretation of what organic production could and should be, and all subject to a critical discussion led by other people who are also committed to developing the organic alternative. Whether this is to produce, find or consume these products, the eco-alternative advocates insist upon the need for each person to keep him or herself informed, gather judgments, inquire about the validity of these judgments, learn how to judge them and thus contribute to the collective task of critiquing and developing the global quality of organics. The sign or certification that establishes the acquisition of organic quality in the first instance constitutes a "reductive" vision, incomplete and at times even inappropriate in the latter. It loses its capacity to designate and is subject to discussion and judgment.

### **The bifurcation of organics?**

The organics currently being developed cannot be monitored for compliance by a third party. Organisations (especially Nature & Progrès) opposed to the AB label since 1995, offer an alternative. They have invented and perfected a participatory guarantee system that, rather than delegating the task to independent third parties, submits all their members' organic production projects to a collective critique by the organisation's engaged and vigilant members (May 2008; Darlong 2008; Fonseca et al. 2008; IFOAM 2007).

In the interviews, the Nature & Progrès and Déméter organisations were described as closed and sectarian groups and their internal monitoring procedures disparaged for their lack of "transparency", "independence" and "objective guarantee". Admittedly, the vigilance procedures regarding engagement are internal and organised by their members, the only people they recognise as competent for this mission. The lack of criteria to define *a priori* organic production is not a lack of transparency; it stems from the impossibility of definitively making organic explicit, taking into consideration every possible factor, in other words, depending on the region, the production, the farm and... the future. The lack of evaluators' independence is, on the contrary, a guarantee of their competence, their sharing of ideas and the discussion of production projects. The proficiency of those evaluating organics as a global quality in the making is tied to and

therefore inseparable from their participation in the drawing up of the quality itself. The notion of independence is meaningless when it involves evaluating the interpretation of an idea or a concept, as is an “objective guarantee”, as both assume that the idea or concept has a defined and objectifiable existence<sup>14</sup>.

Should, then, the AB label and its independent monitoring be replaced by an overall participatory review procedure? This is not an unusual situation; consumers interested in a particular “quality” or object investigate, gather information and even engage in actual “surveys” to make their choices; they thus make use of and contribute to the collective critique that goes with the market circulation of these products. We are also aware of the limitations of this. A strong investment by a large number of buyers is required; their acquisition of information, and the circulation and confrontation of judgments, limit the possibilities of developing and expanding these markets. On the contrary, certifications offer to take responsibility for this survey and to relieve consumers of the task in order to facilitate the profit sharing of new consumers and thus the expansion and growth of the markets. The modest size<sup>15</sup> of the organisations that have distanced themselves from the AB label is usually associated with the strict demands of their standards specifications. This point, however, does not concern consumers; it is hard to see the low membership cost for these organisations<sup>16</sup> as a significant limiting factor. Instead we should probably see their small size as a consequence of the implementation of strict vigilance, promoting small projects on a human scale and short networks where one can still gather information and where participatory monitoring can still take place and remain effective. However, when products travel all over the world, when farms sell hundreds of different products or very large volumes, members are no longer sufficient.

Are we now doomed to divergent organics as suggested in the idea of “bifurcation” (Coombes and Campbell 1998) (Campbell and Liepins 2001), with short networks and participatory monitoring of all the actors, local markets and human scale on one side, and, on the other, international markets, international labels delegated to independent monitoring bodies and organic produce of dubious identity?

### **Sustainable organics: an active and framed goal**

The idea of bifurcation suggests separating into two distinct paths where “eco-alternative” organics remains out of the reach of and protected from “objectified” organics, thus avoiding conventionalisation.

First and foremost, we should not deceive ourselves. These two “organics” are not two different and homonymous versions of organic production. There is not “eco-alternative” organic production on one side, and on the other, a different, “objectified” organic any more than these two organics are the result of two different uses by producers engaged in organic reflection on the one hand and commercial profitability on the other. They are two regimes of action that cause different modes of presence of organics to emerge, one in a form reduced to criteria and the other as a object constantly under construction. Each regime uses different instruments of proof or evaluation of the

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<sup>14</sup> For a full discussion of the objectivity of engaged or disengaged monitoring, see Teil (2001)

<sup>15</sup> In France, Nature & Progrès has around 350 producer-members while 20,000 producers have the AB label certification.

<sup>16</sup> For consumers, membership usually costs between 10 and 20 euros.

object's presence, but these are only judged to be incompatible insofar as the actors esteem that the ways in which they are applied are too different to continue to cohabit under the same name without mutual harm. This is the same question highlighted by the threat of erosion or conventionalisation raised by the eco-alternative camp. Would it be appropriate to separate the two regimes?

Eco-alternative organics would always experience the same difficulties in developing and extending its dense and informed circuits. For its part, objectified organics, like all standards, should be subject to constant revisions, additions and adjustments to adapt to the incessant changes and vagaries, and ensure its sustainability.

Seeking to protect eco-alternative organics by equipping it with more numerous, more objective criteria as advised by Conner (2004), Guthman (2004) and Darnhofer et al. (2010) (as Nature & Progrès and Déméter have been doing for a long time), would mean that the overflowing of the organic movement could be reframed by giving it new limits. However, this process still reproduces (like any guarantee of means or ends) the divergence between organics seen as a goal or as a predefined object. Therefore it is not "the" solution, but a stage of the process in which organics constantly rethinks and revises itself. Like any set of criteria or restrictions that only imperfectly and temporarily captures an object in progress such as organics, it always ends up overflowing over because of the arrival of new people concerned; once again, new explicitations and adjustments of organics must try to frame it<sup>17</sup>.

This framing and overflowing is not due to approximations of criteria and restrictions; it is constitutive of the sustainability of organics which holds together two different modalisations of its existence, since without one another, they are nothing. Objectified organics held their strength from the critical monitoring practised by eco-alternative organics which guide its slow content evolution and guarantee its credibility; reciprocally, the latter increases its development capacities tenfold if it can benefit from the capacity to enlist objectified organics. Together they form the two "pillars" that give its attractiveness and resilience.

As the notion of organics is transformed and diversified, the signs of objectified organics must be readjusted to continue to benefit from the credibility imparted/granted \*\*\* lent by the critique. This is done by reinforcing charters and criteria, in the case of Nature & Progrès and Déméter, or by creating new standards specifications<sup>18</sup>. Their divergences, shown by a variety of charters, pluralise the notion of organic; above all, they result in a growing detachment from the certification that limits the notion of organic. In fact, it is above all the certification that should also be adjusted and revised. It is the same process of exchange between a global vision of organic and its reduced interpretation that should, therefore, be revised regularly by all the members of the organic movement and not merely within its sub-groups to protect producers from sliding standards resulting from innovations brought about by the label and deemed unacceptable.

## Conclusion

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<sup>17</sup> Here we borrow the very appropriate image used by Callon to describe the succession of movements of pausing and questioning that guarantee the durability of action groups (Akrich et al. 2010).

<sup>18</sup> This is the case in France with the new brand *Bio-Cohérence*.

How can the development and sustainability of organic farming be helped? Are its development and sustainability now under threat, as many agrobiologists and researchers claim? Should we, like them, seek to guarantee the durability of organics by means of increasingly thorough knowledge of what it is? This idea supposes that organic is a finite object existing independently of those who contribute each day to make it exist. It is doomed to come up against historical evolutions that destroy definitions one after the other. Starting off from the opposite conception (that analyses organics as the result of the conception and putting into practice by the actors themselves), we have attempted to sketch the original solution they provide to the problems that may be caused by the diversification of a growing movement.

*“Traduttore, traditore”*. As highlighted by the sociology of translation<sup>19</sup>, this adage perfectly captures the difficulties faced by many movements hoping to expand. Translation, in other words, the enrolment of new adepts, always brings new interpretations of the goals or message and new applications of practices, and accompanies the expansion of a movement, the spreading of knowledge or techniques. Seen from the narrow framework of individual or stabilised interpretations, these new interpretations are so many aberrations or blows to their “true” meaning, but also adjustments that enable them to win over a wider public, to expand and to endure. In this way, the development of a new movement often appears obliged to accept a “pluralisation” of its message through the new interpretations brought by new adepts, and this is its strength but also its weakness.

The solution that seems to be emerging consists in holding together (and it is here that the difficulty lies) organics’ two regimes of presence.

The AB label shapes a certification that introduces an objectification of the organic quality. Established to ensure the expansion of organics, it brings interpretations that are sometimes innovative, but whose evaluation escapes the most committed people involved, and relies upon the producers or consumers whose commitment to the development of enduring organic agriculture is not guaranteed. Organisations then react by establishing private brands and tightening standards specifications to correspond to a different conception of organics, not as criteria defining the scope of a quality but as a minimum framework to outline the elaboration of organics as a goal or global quality that is not predefined, extending without *a priori* limits to every area of production, distribution and consumption. Through their internal critical vigilance, they bring about organics’ continual adjustment and revision in order to make it sustainable and durable. These organisations, however, add a major constraint of active participation in the discussion of organics.

Organics now appears as an object combining strongly opposed and rival conceptions. Rather than distinguishing them or relinquishing one or other of the conceptions, we have defended the idea that it is important to maintain their interaction so that organics can benefit from the development capacities provided by the organic quality objectified in certification, and so that the innovations this generates can be validated by a critical discussion of organics as a global quality and not simply as the respect of *a priori* criteria.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. (Law and Williams 1982; Callon et al. 1983; Latour 1984) or the anthology (Akrich, Callon, and Latour 2006) for a new edition of the founding texts.



Lastly, the fear of conventionalisation appears as one line of inquiry (by the eco-alternative organic camp)<sup>20</sup> to examine the healthy coexistence of the two regimes. As long as it does not conclude that is necessary to split up into two incompatible “visions” and give them two different names - which is what has happened in other cases of certifications (Teil 2011) – this contributes to their mutual interaction.

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<sup>20</sup> The “label supporters” camp raises another, symmetrical line of inquiry that highlights the confinement of organics to organisations’ internal, collective critique.

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## Appendices: detail of the distribution of the survey interviews

### Vintners

| Type of farming unit | Type of environmental quality                    | Nombre   |    |      |
|----------------------|--|----------|----|------|
|                      |  | V. de L. | LR | Jura |
| Cooperative          | Without  | 1        |    |      |
| Cooperative          | Industrial quality certification                 | 1        | 2  |      |
| Cooperative          | Integrated Viticulture                           | 1        | 3  |      |
| Cooperative          | With part of the production certified as organic |          | 2  |      |
| Farm                 | Without  | 8        | 1  |      |
| Farm                 | Industrial quality certification                 |          | 4  |      |
| Farm                 | Integrated Viticulture                           | 7        | 5  |      |
| Farm                 | Non certified Integrated Viticulture             | 5        | 5  |      |
| Farm                 | Certified AB                                     | 26       | 14 |      |
| Farm                 | Certified biodynamics                            | 13       | 5  |      |
| Farm                 | Uncertified biodynamics                          | 4        |    |      |
| Farm                 | « natural wine » or « terroir wine »             | 2        | 4  | 2    |
|                      | Total  | 68       | 45 | 2    |
|                      | Total  | 115      |    |      |

*Although also organic, Biodynamic producers do not appear under the certified count.*

*V. de L.: Val de Loire  
LR: Languedoc Roussillon*

### All sample

| Activity                |   | Nb  | Technique&research           | Technical training               | 6 |
|-------------------------|---|-----|------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Producers</i>        | All   | 115 |                              | Organic technical training       | 3 |
|                         | AB Organic certified                                  | 62  |                              | Research                         | 4 |
|                         | AB “committed”  | 10  |                              | Agronomy Teaching                | 1 |
| <i>Retail and sales</i> | Superstores   | 9   | <i>Farming syndicate</i>     | Farming syndicate                | 7 |
|                         | Wine trade  | 1   | <i>Quality certification</i> | Integrated viticulture           | 4 |
|                         | Wine seller   | 8   |                              | Industrial quality certification | 1 |
|                         | Organic coop shop                                     | 5   |                              | Organic certification            | 1 |
|                         | Organic Associative shop                              | 1   |                              | AOC certification                | 9 |
|                         | Franchisee organic shop                               | 1   | <i>Catering</i>              | Organic catering                 | 3 |
|                         | Wine shop with mixed (organic and non organic) supply | 11  | <i>Media</i>                 | Wine critique                    | 4 |
| <i>Administratio</i>    | Agriculture Ministry                                  | 6   |                              | Regional                         | 2 |

|                               |                                 |       |                  |                     |     |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|------------------|---------------------|-----|
| <i>n</i>                      |                                 |       |                  | press               |     |
|                               | Agence bio                      | 2     |                  | Organic critic      | 1   |
|                               | AOC Administration              | 4     |                  | Natural wine critic | 2   |
| <i>Agro-chemical Industry</i> | Agro-chemical firm              | 5     |                  | Economic press      | 1   |
|                               | Agro-chemical products retailer | 1     | <i>Consumers</i> | Consumer s          | 3   |
|                               |                                 | Total |                  |                     | 231 |