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# Organic farming in France: an alternative project or conventionalization?

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## Introduction

While organic farming is widely recognized by markets and public institutions alike, this does not prevent heated debates over its definition and its bounds of legitimacy. Indeed, if it is subject to public regulation and labeling (European Regulation (EC) No 834/2007), there are still divergences as to its nature, its objectives and the representations and values associated with it. There is a continuum of positions and practices between the proponents of organic as an alternative social project and those who see it more simply as a technical model of agriculture with a market that is complementary to the dominant model (Verhaegen, 2012). These divergences are emblematic of different positions actors have taken with regards to the initial political project of organic farming and its evolution.

The practices of a type of agriculture called 'organic' have been referred to as such since the 1930s. The organic pioneers so named their own practices so to distinguish theirs as an alternative model to the then emerging industrial model of agriculture. This alternative model integrated agronomic, economic, social, political and philosophical dimensions (Besson, 2011, Leroux, 2014). But the institutionalization of organic farming did not formalize until the early 1990s. Organic became an official and certified market standard, before becoming enrolled into a broader field of sustainable development (Fouilleux and Loconto 2017). Despite its small size if compared to the conventional agriculture sector (5.7% of the agricultural land and 3.5% of the food market in France, according to Agence Bio in 2016), the organic sector has exhibited much stronger growth with a 17% increase in producers and 21.7% increase in consumption in France in 2016 and consolidation and integration of its sectors and professional networks. This process of institutionalization has at the same time distanced organic from many of its founding principles (Freyer and Bingen 2014). This 'conventionalization' critique of the organic movement was introduced by Buck et al. (1997) and has been taken up widely in scientific, professional and activist circles (Darnofer et al., 2010; Baqué, 2012). These criticisms have led to the (re)emergence of cognitive and organizational devices that reaffirm the social movement dimension of organic that critiques capitalism. Two movements can be traced, one in the promotion of participatory guarantee systems (PGS) as alternatives to third-party certification and another in the emergence and strengthening of private, "bio +" standards that go beyond the regulated organic requirements.

In this chapter, we trace the evolutionary trajectory of organic farming as it has moved from representing a political critique to a market segment based on an official label. We explore the tensions that these dynamics created among the actors in the organic field. The analysis is based on three separate studies of governance, certification and private standards for organic farming (Fouilleux and Loconto, 2014; Lemeilleur and Allaire 2014; Poméon *et al*, 2014) that were presented at the 2014 Symposium. Primary data were collected from interviews with producers, representatives of professional organizations and management bodies, various experiences of participating observation and analysis of different types of documents (websites, specifications, etc.). In the first section, we explain the initial project of organic agriculture and its transcription into a set of practices and devices. Here, we focus on the tensions and debates arising from its progressive institutionalization in France. Then we will explain how this regulatory and market

institutionalization of organic agriculture has profoundly modified the rules of the field, the type of actors involved and their practices. This leads into the third section that focuses on the contemporary movement to reactivate the critical and alternative dimension of organic through the revival of participatory certification and the multiplication of private standards aimed at going beyond the public standard. If we mainly focus here in the French case, our analyses are quite representative of what happens in the worldwide organic field in terms of conventionalization dynamics and counter dynamics.

## 1. From a multifaceted critique of capitalism to conventionalization

While scholars point to a progressive conventionalization of organic, the question of coherence between the practices, principles and values associated with organic farming has also been raised. To address these concerns, we analyze the evolution of this field, both from the point of view of the ideas carried by the historical organic actors and the devices that they have developed. We borrow a conceptual framework that positions the dynamics of these ideas within critiques of capitalism, specifically, how organic agriculture emerged in an environment that challenges the inclusion of agriculture into a capitalist logic. The concepts and critical grammar developed by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) and Chiapello (2009) allow us to describe and characterize the critiques of capitalism, its forms, its effects and its appropriation by capitalist actors since the mid-nineteenth century. This framework enables us to describe and analyze the forms of capitalist critique that are present in the organic movement and how these have changed over time. This is of course a critique that is situated in time and space, which evolves, and which is either advanced or sidelined. To characterize the forms taken by the critique, two questions adapted from Chiapello's (2009) conceptual framework (see table 1) must be analyzed: *What is denounced in 'conventional' agriculture by organic advocates, and based on which values?*

**Table 1: The four types of criticism of capitalism (Chiapello, 2009, p. 65)**

	<b>Conservative Criticism</b>	<b>Social Criticism</b>	<b>Artistic Criticism</b>	<b>Ecological criticism</b>
<b>Causes of indignation</b>	Poverty/insecurity, moral disorder, destruction of solidarity, class struggle	Poverty/inequalities, wage relations, exploitation, command of capital, class domination	Mediocrity, stupidity; uniformization, massification, commodification, conditioning; alienation	Destruction of ecosystem, species, and human habitats
<b>Underlying Values</b>	Shared dignity common to all human beings, class interdependence, moral duty of the elite	Labor, equality (in economic terms and in decision-making) as the necessary condition for a true freedom	Personal autonomy (internal and external), taste and refined existence (art, philosophy, truth, etc.)	Shared dignity common to all living beings, life of future generations

In France as well as worldwide, organic pioneers denounce the artificialization of agriculture based on three core arguments: the link between production methods, food and health; the question of farmers' autonomy vis-à-vis the purchase of inputs and the sale of products; and, a concern for the preservation of natural resources (Piriou, 2002). Leroux (2014) proposes that the socio-genesis of French organic farming is linked to a critique of industrial capitalism and its capture of the food and agriculture sectors. With significant involvement from non-farmers (doctors, consumers, etc.), organic first emerged in France more as a social movement than a professional farmer identity. Scholars cite a historical link between critiques of capitalism and those of the transformations of agriculture and the agro-food systems that began at the end of the 19th century

(Viel, 1979, Piriou, 2002, Leroux, 2014). These transformations produced a pluralistic critique from the organic movement as they resisted against what the early actors saw as processes of artificialization, industrialization, commodification, and market dominance by agri-business (seed and input suppliers), large-scale processing and distribution groups. GABO (Association of organic farmers in the West, first organic farmers group in France founded in 1959) was thus formed in this spirit *"that is to say in reaction to this modernity (referred to as" progress ")*, which challenges a set of traditional peasant values for which and through which they view the future" (Leroux, 2011, p.42-43). Thus, in France as in other countries, the roots of organic are marked by a rejection of capitalism in its technical and industrial forms, rather than by the social inequalities it generates. It is the physical and moral decay brought about by industrialization and commodification that is pointed out first and foremost, with an aspirational return to an idealized peasant society. For Viel (1979), this early agrarian conservatism, which he calls "reactionary", would merge with other critiques of capitalism that eventually give rise to values specific to organic agriculture.

In 1962, the French Association of Organic Agriculture (AFAB), was founded as the national version of GABO. But quickly two visions clash and give rise to a split in the movement. On one side, the Lemaire-Boucher group promotes a commercial orientation with conservative values (Viel, 1979; Leroux, 2011). On the other, and in reaction to this commercial positioning, Nature et Progrès (N&P) is created in 1964 as an association that brings together farmers, processors, suppliers, distributors and especially consumers. Structured around relatively autonomous local groups, it simultaneously promotes a set of production practices and a lifestyle. N&P's mission developed a more societal and transversal character, in opposition to the productivist and consumerist capitalist society. Progressively, N&P aligned itself more closely to the protest movements linked to May 1968, anti-capitalism, anti-centralism and environmentalism. The association thus gradually detached itself from the original conservative matrix, focusing instead on values such as autonomy, energy and technological conservation and local economies (Viel, 1979; Leroux, 2014). These elements echo the artistic, social and ecological criticisms (see Table 1) that characterize the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These movements would thus play a significant role in the views about and development of organic agriculture in the 1980s. During this period, the rejection of consumerism and its conventional distribution channels became a core value, that was reinforced with a collectivist, commune character that was found in many of the neo-rural projects of the time. Beyond the networks of actors involved, the critical dimension of organic farming can also be found in the model advocated and practiced: small, diversified and autonomous farms with a preference for a system of direct sales of raw or lightly processed products (Viel, 1979).

The vision advocated by N&P gradually overtook that of Lemaire-Boucher (Leroux, 2011), becoming in the late 1970s the driving force of the organic movement. It is therefore its vision, its criteria and its standards that served as the main reference point in the process of institutionalization. As described by Piriou (2002), this began in 1980 with the Loi d'Orientation Agricole. This process, demanded by the organic movement and led by N&P led to the official recognition and regulation, in France and then in Europe, of organic agriculture. The progress that we can trace is from 11 private standards recognized with the AB label in France in 1989, to a single standard and label controlled by the European Union from 1991 onwards. Organic agriculture thus gradually became a unified reality, at least from an institutional point of view.

In this process of regulatory institutionalization, the ecological critique became central to the form of capitalist critique that we currently see in organic agriculture (Chiapello, 2009). While it became a promising, unifying element (around the need to reduce input costs and promote the multifunctionality of agriculture) of the organic movement, thus making space for organic practices in different public and private arena, the ecological critique marginalized the socio-economic dimensions of the movement. Organic products were brought to market and, as such, provided the justification to the State to protect consumers via an official label. In addition, as organic gradually emerged as a credible alternative, a growing number of actors who were not initially present in the

movement seized the opportunity to respond to the critiques of the environmental impacts of chemical agriculture and to the successive food crises (mad cow, dioxin, etc.). But this appropriation by external actors is accompanied by compromises that result in a selection and limitation of criticism and its transformative potential. This dilution of the critical stance is similar to that shown by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) on the integration of artistic criticism into management practices following the May 1968 movement. In the case of organic, it has led to the creation of a market standard, supported by Europe in its role as a provider of public environmental goods, and as a niche market.

This position is condemned by many actors, who view the market mainstreaming as a dilution of the transformative social mission of the organic project (Baqué, 2012). From the outset, organic farming has always been plagued by ambiguities about its relationship to the market. Yet despite the critique that this market position threatens the agricultural practices and the quality of organic products, most organic farmers have been and still are included in the market economy. Although organic farmers often prefer short supply chains, long supply chains have developed relatively quickly, with their own wholesalers, processors and distributors. These debates on the positioning of organic within conventional markets are still very present in France, particularly around the role of large retailers, the increasingly transactional nature of certification, or the market segmentation of organic (the niche market versus the overall transition from agriculture to a new sociotechnical model). These debates testify both to the critical position of organic as a social movement in opposition to liberal capitalist regulation of trade and the difficulties that actors face in balancing their activities between ideas and practices.

It is thus in the context of renewed power struggles that organic farming has evolved and is currently defined (Piriou, 2002). Those actors linked to a more radical and holistic critique of the capitalist system and the agro-industrial complex must deal with new players, attracted by the opportunities of the organic market and who do not share the same visions and objectives. The domination of ecological criticism has not, however, evacuated other forms of criticism, to which it may even be associated (Chiapello, 2009). The challenge is for the different actors to build the political value of their vision, like the one that combines ecology and autonomy, against a technocratic vision of ecology is often antagonistic to it.<sup>1</sup>

The success of organic agriculture, attested by the development of a specific market (Allaire, 2016), is balanced by debates around the weakening of its critical scope, expressed in the concept of conventionalization (Coombes and Campbell, 1998; Darnhofer *et al*, 2010). The notion of conventionalization appeared for the first time in the Buck *et al.* (1997) study of California organic and refers to a variety of processes. A first definition is linked to the evolution of the motivations of the practitioners of the organic farming, among which the economic opportunity would play an increasing role. Here, the structures and management tend to resemble those of conventional agriculture, including a substitution of land and labor for capital (Guthman, 2004). Conventionalization can also be understood as a standardization of agronomic practices that would reduce its ecological and ethical significance, attributed to the reduction of principles that are used in certification or the dynamics of knowledge systems (Stassart and Jamar, 2009). The logic of input substitution (using organic inputs instead of synthetic inputs) prevails over systems redesign that requires a connection between polyculture and livestock (Rosset and Altieri, 1997, Lamine and Bellon, 2009). Another definition refers to the development of market channels for organic products within conventional and global value chains driving by multinational agribusinesses and supermarkets (Jaffree and Howard, 2009), associated with a diversification of buyers and purchasing practices of organic products.

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<sup>1</sup> To illustrate this vision the arguments developed include GMOs as environmental service technology for restricting the use of pesticides.

Generally, conventionalization refers simultaneously to the changes made by the historical actors of the organic sector and to the characteristics of the new arrivals, who often respect the regulatory requirements of organic but not its historical principles and values. The capacity of standards, and their social and political dynamics, to take these principles and values into account and to implement them becomes a key issue (De Wit and Verhoog, 2007, Darnhofer *et al* 2010).

## 2. The effects of institutionalization centered on a market standard

Can the initial organic agriculture project survive its institutionalization in the form of a standard? For Piriou (2002, p.409), "*as long as organic agriculture is recognized only as an ensemble of technical or market requirements and not as an innovative production system it cannot question the dominant agricultural model.*" Thus, we argue that we must look beyond what happens to the critical capacity of organic when it shifted from a political agenda to a set of technical standards. We must also consider the institutional effects associated with standard-setting in the analysis of the processes of conventionalization. There are several insights to be gained from examining the development of service markets for certification and accreditation activities.

Indeed, the "voluntary standard" instrument that regulates the organic field has its own institutional effects linked to the fact that it is based on a set of imbricated markets. It is based first and foremost on standards (a list of specific practices to be implemented by the producer or manufacturer), to which an associated on-product label can be used by producers so to distinguish them from other products that look similar. The label signals to the consumer that the conditions of production that are invisible to the naked eye (no chemicals, etc.) have been used. To achieve this, operators must undergo a process called "third-party certification", which guarantees the credibility of the system. In other words, they must accept that their production practices are controlled by an independent operator, the certifier, who, if he considers that they comply with the specifications, issues them a certificate of conformity authorizing the use of the label. The producer pays the certifier for this inspection service. The last element to ensure trust and credibility in this system is that the certifier is itself controlled by an "accrediting" body, which he pays, who oversees the certifier's competence to certify compliance with a given voluntary standard. The voluntary standard thus refers to a complex regulatory system based on multiple market transactions, associating standards (with or without a label), certification and accreditation. This interweaving of markets for products and services can be described as a *tripartite standards regime* or TSR (Loconto, Stone and Busch, 2012; Fouilleux and Loconto, 2017), which is a internationalized institutional system that combines public and private actors. The establishment of a TSR is justified by the desire to legitimize a standard and to guarantee the effectiveness of the practices that it covers. It relies on a set of principles: harmonization and readability (simplicity) of rules and criteria, independence and impartiality of control. It is the effectiveness of these principles and the effects of the implementation of an organic TSR that can shed light on the past and present dynamics in this field.

In the European Union, public authorities imposed third party certification after the organic regulation was introduced in 1991. It involves standardized procedures, mainly based on document control (accounting, invoices, etc.) and a visit to the headquarters of the farm and sometimes a visit to the fields. No interaction other than control-related interaction should take place between the farmer and the certifier, advice or tips on how to improve the farming practices are strictly forbidden. Accreditation is also organized at European level and governed by Regulation (EC) No 765/2008, which implies that a body specifically designated by the State controls and accredits the capacity of the certifier to certify in general (in conformity with the European standard ISO 17065 / NE 45011), and on the other hand that the certifier is accredited to certify the European standard of organic farming. Within the European Union, these two procedures are delegated to the Member States, which themselves delegate to private actors. In France, the responsible organizations are the French Accreditation Committee (COFRAC) and the National Institute of Origin and Quality (INAO).

The European regulation was quickly followed by the emergence of public organic standards around the world, all following the TSR model (87 countries in 2016) (Willer and Lernoud, 2017). From this point forward, discussions focused mainly on the means of facilitating and increasing trade as much as possible at both European and international levels. While the harmonization efforts made it possible to extend the markets for organically grown products, including the market for auditable standards, they have also made it possible to transfer to the Global South a vision of organic agriculture. In developing countries, organic was mainly developed by international and bilateral cooperation agencies and importers, and not as a pluralistic social movement criticism anchored in local environments, as was the case in Europe<sup>2</sup>. Rather, organic emerge here quasi-exclusively around export products and according to the rules of the TSR, mainly embodied by US and European certifiers (Willer and Lernoud, 2016). The aim was to encourage the development of organic products by structuring a differentiated and remunerative market capable of attracting new players. At the level of the organic standard, this resulted in a desire to harmonize and simplify the rules, to make them more accessible to producers and more intelligible to consumers. Harmonization of rules at the national, European (Gibbon, 2008) and international levels (through the projects financed by UNCTAD, FAO, IFOAM, SIDA, etc.) has effectively excluded the idiosyncratic dimensions of organic and the particularities of each agro-ecosystem. The need to simplify, so to put in place auditable criteria, has forced the shift from an organic based on a set of global principles and objectives shared and translated to each local context to a set of reductionist technical criteria. We see emerging from this experience an organic standard that aims only to ensure the circulation of organic products and the extension of its market (Fouilleux and Loconto, 2017).

The functions and organization of certification systems have also changed considerably. Prior to the introduction of third-party certification, the control system was based on farmer exchanges and support with other organic stakeholders, especially consumers, being highly involved in the control mechanisms. With the introduction of the TSR, certifiers have become key actors in the institutionalization of the organic field, even as their interests and strategies have become increasingly estranged from the original values and principles of organic. What began as informal certification groups and associations have become autonomous enterprises. Specialized multinational certification companies (e.g., Bureau Veritas), seeing the market opportunity, have purchased small organic certifiers and begun to compete with the mission-driven certifiers (Garcia-Papet, 2012). These market dynamics have in fact shifted the practice of certification away from the original intent of certification by committed members of the organic movement. Instead, the current focus of certifiers is to provide internationally competitive prices for a broad portfolio of services, including the creation of new standards that go beyond the public organic regulation and even create competition for it. Organic agriculture finds itself competing with other labels and standards, developed by certifiers or other private firms or corporations, both in terms of market share and political and social legitimacy. This pressure has led IFOAM to consider aligning their standards with 'weaker' standards that dominate some trading systems such as GlobalGAP (Fouilleux and Loconto, 2017). Certification within the TSR has become a market in and of itself (certification market) that has a value (price premium or market access) and is exclusive from other forms of certification. It may exclude legitimate actors, for example producers who cannot afford to pay a certifier, and it can block peasant innovations (Lemeilleur *et al.*, 2015). Its homogenizing character ignores the diversity of contexts that were fundamental to the origins of organic standards and control systems.

The accreditation system, which underpins the credibility and coherence of the entire TSR, has also undergone a series of changes. The European Union defines accreditation as a non-profit activity entrusted to state-sanctioned national monopolies (either public or private) so to privilege the credibility mission rather than the market mission of competition and profit. Yet if competition is absent at the European level, we find accreditation bodies competing internationally for markets,

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<sup>2</sup> This doesn't mean that critiques and alternative forms of agriculture has not emerged in these countries, but rather they have been focus on different issues such as agroecology or land reform.

which is a direct result of the European regulations for conformity assessment that have been adopted by the Organic regulation. Indeed, for countries outside the EU that do not benefit from equivalency agreements<sup>3</sup>, EU approved certifiers must monitor the implementation of EU rules. These EU approved certification bodies are thus transformed into standard-setters who must adapt EU public standards for a global private organic market, which amounts to a parallel accreditation system controlled by the European Commission. Furthermore, accreditation bodies use the public authority allocated to them at European level to become 'accreditors for the world' and to expand their markets in countries in the South. For example, the German National Accreditation Body (DakS) accredits Biolatina (Peru), COAE and ECOA (Egypt), CERTIMEX (Mexico), Argencert (Argentina), and INDOCERT (India). Finally, EU accredited multinational certification bodies, who do not have local branches in all countries, tend to outsource the inspection services to non-accredited local inspectors, which in turn induces the emergence of a parallel local market for auditing.

More generally, this focuses the public and private organic standards of different countries towards a hegemonic global model that promotes the EU organic standard, with its rules, its dominant players and its logics of market development<sup>4</sup>. This model contributes to the conventionalization of organic for two reasons: first, the watchdog approach leaves little room for political, ethical and critical stances by actors in the system; and second, its hegemony prohibits the original intent of the founders that general organic principles should be translated and adapted by the local groups (including players in the industry but also consumers, doctors, etc.) to their contexts. This moves the movement in the direction of a dispossession of organic agriculture, which grows in response to some questioning of the different dimensions of the organic TSR that we return to in section three of this chapter.

In sum, the organization of the organic field as a TSR has been a key 'hidden' force in the conventionalization of organic. It has strengthened and legitimized the concept of organic by guaranteeing a market demand. Nonetheless, these same mechanisms have kept organic as a niche market where its products must compete not only against conventional products but also against other 'sustainable' products. The consequence of this form of conventionalization is that the original leaders of the organic movement (farmers, doctors, consumers, nutritionist, technicians) have been disenfranchised of their ability to define organic and have been replaced by the State, certifiers and accreditors. We can trace through this movement an impoverishment of organic's political project via the transformation of principles into technical criteria and the commodification of relationships within the industry (between producers, certifiers, accreditors). The constraints related to the internationalization of the organic standard (and related markets) have further reinforced this trend. Faced with the reality of its progressive conventionalization and for the sake of re-appropriation and reactivation of the social and political dimensions of organic farming, some organic actors in France and elsewhere have created or reactivated different devices existing in the margins of the TSR to regain the initial project; these include the development of private standards and a revival of participatory guarantee systems.

### 3. The proliferation of standards and the return of participatory certification

Even though the European Regulation replaced the existing national specifications beginning in 1991 (1999 for animal products), this does not mean that private standards disappeared. There are currently about fifteen private standards in France, which are legally registered as private brands. If

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<sup>3</sup> In third countries benefiting from an equivalency agreement with the EU, the products certified organic by accredited certification bodies in their countries of origin per the procedures of that country can be exported to the European market without the need for additional EU accreditation of the certification bodies.

<sup>4</sup> The European hegemony in the field of organic agriculture can be explained by several factors, especially the late development of a national standard in the US (2000) and the importance of early European movements (i.e., Nature & Progrès, Soil Association, Demeter) in the international organic movement, led by IFOAM.

the brand is not used as a complement to the EU organic label – put differently, if the producer is not also certified against the European regulation – the users of the brand cannot use the term organic to describe their production practices or products. Of the eleven private standards that were approved by the French state in 1991, four still existed in 2013:

- **Nature and Progrès** (N&P), as mentioned above, was a pioneer in the French organic movement;
- **Demeter**, a biodynamic standard and the first organic standard in the world, established in Germany in 1928;
- **Biobourgogne**, an association and regional brand, created in 1981 and linked to N&P;
- **SIMPLES** (InterMassif Union for a Simple Production and Economy), focused on plant production and collection, linked to N&P.

Since 2002, 13 new private standards have emerged:

- **Biobreizh**, created in 2002 by the Association of Organic Fruit and Vegetable Producers of Brittany, which is a sector and regionally specific brand and **Bio Loire Océan** (2005), its counterpart in the Loire Valley;
- **Biodyvin** (2002), a splinter group from Demeter, this standard focuses on biodynamic wine producers;
- **Bio Solidaire** created in 2009 by the Bio Partenaire association as a means to promote the "North-North" exchanges of the BioEquitable brand, which combines organic and fair trade;
- **Bio Cohérence**, led by FNAB and established in 2010 as a reaction against the weakening of the European regulation during its 2007 revision;<sup>5</sup>
- Regional brands such **Alsace Bio** (2004), **Paysan Bio Lorrain** (2005), **Mon Bio Pays de la Loire** (2012), **Saveurs Bio Paris Ile de France** (2011), **Bio di Corsica** (2013), **Bio Sud Ouest** (2013), ou encore la charte **Bio Rhône Alpes** (2010).

These private standards represent about 2,285 producers, representing 9% of organic farmers, who themselves represent 4.9% of French farmers in 2013 (see Table 2)<sup>6</sup>. Some private standards also combine processors, distributors, and even consumers (in N&P and Bio Cohérence).

**Table 2: Number of farmers under private standard in 2013<sup>7</sup>**

	Nature & Progrès		Demeter	Biodyvin	Bio Cohérence	Bio Solidaire	Biobreizh	Bio Loire Océan	Others <sup>1</sup>	Total
	Off label AB	In AB label								
Number of Producers	350	350	430	90	300	300	65	50	350	<b>2285</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes BioBourgogne, SIMPLE and the other regional brands mentioned above.

In 1989, N&P and Demeter, with 1,161 and 222 producers respectively, represented 42% and 8% of the 2,768 organic producers (0.27% of farmers at the time) using private standard (Robidel, 2014). The remaining producers were using the now extinct standards. In the 1990s, we witnessed a relative and absolute decline in the use of private standards as the French organic movement was restructured and realigned around a public standard. For example, N&P experienced a mass exodus

<sup>5</sup> These relaxations are mainly the authorization of 'parallel production' (organic and non-organic on the same farm), a weakening of the need for agriculture to be linked to the soil, a reduction in the minimum slaughter age for chickens, increased tolerance for GMO traces from 0.1 to 0.9%.

<sup>6</sup> We find private organic standards in all European countries, standards that generally add stricter requirements to those included in the EU organic label. In some cases, their influence in the national organic movements is more significant than in France. For example, the Soil Association is used by more than 50% of the organic producers in the UK, and in Germany more than half of all organic producers are also certified for a private standard (e.g., Naturland, Bioland or Demeter).

<sup>7</sup> Producers numbers are approximate and were obtained during interviews and/or via publicly available information about the organizations (brochures, website).

of producers from its groups during this period. But a differentiation process was reactivated in the early 2000s and private organic standards regained ground.

One explanation this resurgence lies the use of differentiation strategies to enhance value, in an increasingly competitive organic market. But we also observe new membership and new standards as an expression of dissatisfaction with the public standard. We can identify attempts to regain the demanding and holistic approach to organic, as illustrated by the example of Bio Cohérence.<sup>8</sup> N&P's standard for crop production also illustrates this attitude:

*In light of the preamble to the EEC regulation for organic agriculture which speaks only of "markets," Nature & Progrès considers "Organic" in its global dimension, is still not recognized, thereby risking its abuse. This single preamble of "official organic" fully justifies the keeping the Nature & Progrès label.*

From this point of view, the existence and the creation of private standards that are more stringent than the official organic label can be understood as a part of the negotiation process among actors in the organic field. Indeed, the groups who created these private labels are also involved, in different ways, in the negotiations on the revision of the European standard.

Private standards differ in their purposes, their visions of agriculture, operating procedures (organizational form, reference materials, control practices, financing, etc.) and their relationship to the rest of the industry (Espagne, 2014). They are part of a trend of 'bio+' labels that add requirements to the public standard without opposing it outright. Indeed, apart from SIMPLES union and N&P,<sup>9</sup> the private standards make compliance with the European standard a baseline requirement. Even if these private standards are marginal in terms of product sales, their promoters are often active in the dissemination of alternative ideas and practices within the organic movement. An analysis of their historical dynamics reveals three typical logics driving their development:

1. Segment and differentiate supply to meet demand, increase competitiveness and create a niche;
2. Better coordinate and structure the supply, especially to create economies of scale in logistics and marketing;
3. Compensate the deficiencies of the public organic standard by proposing a promising alternative standard of what organic should be.

While the first two logics are related to the organization of the sector and its market, the third is a socio-political logic that questions the collective future of organic according to the social change that it promotes. These three logics are found in all the private standards, but they differ according to which logic dominates their messaging efforts.

As part of this last logic, we can identify diverging visions among these different private standards. First, many regional brands impose rules on the origin of products, sometimes with a set of guiding principles, but without much else restricting production. Promoted by a range of actors (e.g., producers' organizations, processors' associations, local authorities), their main goal is to organize and promote a local organic supply. We can find other organizing activities associated with these initiatives such as common pooling of resources, using marketing instruments (logos, trade fairs, publicity) or market placement (aggregating supplies through platforms), and knowledge exchanges.

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<sup>8</sup> The National Federation of Organic Agriculture (FNAB), a national union that counts half of the country's organic producers as members raises the double-edge question when introducing its Bio Cohérence standard: "Can and should the development of organic escape the 'conventionalization' trap?" See: [http://www.fnab.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=655:bio-coherence&catid=22:news-of-partners](http://www.fnab.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=655:bio-coherence&catid=22:news-of-partners)

<sup>9</sup> Half of the N&P producers are nonetheless also certified AB.

Other private standards adopt an agroecological positioning (similar to that defined by Guthman, 2004) that goes beyond the public standard on several criteria where the EU standard is found lacking, e.g., production diversity, autonomous fodder, restricted list of authorized inputs, etc. They also establish stricter composition requirements for processed products. These standards introduce not only additional environmental requirements, but also requirements for autonomy, local sourcing and the authenticity and naturalness of the products. Products carrying these standards' labels are almost exclusively sold in specialist organic boutiques or via direct sales. On one end of the spectrum, Bio Solidaire and Bio Cohérence explicitly prohibit the sale of their products in conventional supermarkets and Bio Cohérence offers a certification for distributors. On the other end, Biobreizh is traded in long supply chains and does not exclude supermarkets.

In general, the standards' social, ethical and economic criteria (e.g., farm size, economic relations, price, market, employment, etc.) are designed and evaluated with a 'non-industrial' or 'traditional' form of agriculture in mind. Measurable criteria are often supplemented by principles with varying levels of sanction (including the possibility of expulsion) that are contained in an associated charter signed by members. N&P and Bio Cohérence are the strictest standards and Biobreizh is working to improve its requirements on these dimensions. Bio Solidaire differs from other standards by its collective approach of including supply chain actors in its system (producers, buyers, processors). By promoting North-North fair trade, Bio Solidaire imposes strict rules on contractual exchanges, guaranteed minimum prices and sustainable partnerships between producers and buyers. At N&P issues of equity and the nature of trade are included in a separate charter that lists their social, economic and environmental principles. Demeter refers to the principles of anthroposophy in its reference values while Bio Cohérence explicitly recommends criteria for certified distributors (e.g., wage differentials, share of permanent employees) and prohibits the hiring of workers through contracts that apply a foreign, rather than the French national, labor law.

In terms of certification, Demeter, Biobreizh, Bio Cohérence and Bio Solidaire delegate their audits to third-party certifiers, who conduct joint audits (of both the private and public standards) so to reduce costs. N&P, BioBourgogne and SIMPLES use the participatory guarantee systems (PGS)<sup>10</sup> that they had developed in the 1970s. PGS are local groups of producers, processors and consumers who assume the audit functions (peer control procedures) and conduct social controls. While they used only marginally in France, PGS have been on the international organic scene since the early 2000s (Fouilleux and Loconto, 2017, Lemeilleur and Allaire, 2014, Loconto et al. 2016). In 2016, PGS were active or in development in 72 countries around the world and are recognized in the public organic standards of Brazil, Bolivia, Chile and India.<sup>11</sup> IFOAM defines PGS as "*locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.*"<sup>12</sup> In some cases they are close to the internal control systems<sup>13</sup> set up for farmer groups in the South to reduce the costs of certification (Van der Akker, 2009). Yet there are several key differences, like the inclusion of different types of actors in the control system (consumers, municipal officials, researchers), the ability to remain organized as a network without a mandatory requirement to form a cooperative, and the reliance on farmer-led 'peer-reviews' without a third-party control (Lemeilleur and Allaire, 2014; Loconto 2017).

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<sup>10</sup> Demeter is also working on developing a PGS.

<sup>11</sup> The implications of alternative certification systems is also valid for other sustainability standards.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.ifoam.bio/sites/default/files/pgs\\_definition\\_in\\_different\\_languages.pdf](http://www.ifoam.bio/sites/default/files/pgs_definition_in_different_languages.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> This type of certification is based on two stages: an internal control carried out by the producers or the federating structure and an external audit of the system carried out by an independent certifier. This systems has existed in Southern countries since the 1990s and in Europe since 2008 for the protected geographical indications.

The recent renewed interest in PGS is motivated by a critique of the logics and effects of the hegemonic TSR explained in the last section. This critique has inspired debates within IFOAM and other organizations (IFOAM, 2014). Indeed, third-party certification is based on a privileging of distance (lack of communication between auditor and producer, no advisory function) and organizational independence to ensure compliance (Jahn *et al.*, 2005; Hatanaka and Busch, 2008). Rather than being accompanied,<sup>14</sup> the producer is subjected to an audit that serves to prove his/her innocence (of not using banned products) (IFOAM, 2005). Moreover, the cost of third-party certification is considered too high, particularly for small producers and highly diversified production systems.<sup>15</sup> This system can create exclusion and thus unfairly apply the right to use the term 'organic' (Lemeilleur and Allaire, 2014). Finally, it reduces organic to a set of control points and predefined indicators. It does not consider local specificities and production systems or the dimension of making progress over time. The desire for measurability and simplified audits has increased traceability, but there is no clear record of effective environmental and social performance of certified production (Lemeilleur *et al.*, 2015). This contradicts the founding principles of organic, which reject the privileging of generic technical solutions over adaptation to the natural environment (including both its potential and its limitations). Third-party certification thereby decouples the organic standard from a holistic vision of organic as a set of values and practices.

These values and practices of organic agriculture could be considered as intellectual common-pool resources threatened by privatization of the resource, and in this sense PGS appears as the reconquest of the common (Lemeilleur et Allaire, 2016). Indeed, PGS are collective management and audit devices that are flexible and participatory as they are entrusted to local groups composed of producers, consumers and other stakeholders (Nelson *et al.*, 2010). Each participant, auditor or audited, is involved at an even level of responsibility. The PGS is first and foremost seen as an advisory tool for continuous improvement of the producer, in pace with his/her specific environmental and socio-economic context and ambitions (Hochreiter, 2011). The standard-setting, verification and decision-making procedures are based on the principles of participation and horizontality to develop a "shared compromise." Local groups are typically federated into a larger association that ensures coordination, guidance and support (e.g., document templates, training) and, if necessary, arbitration in disputes. The audit reports and decisions are usually made public (Nelson *et al.*, 2010), ensuring a full responsibility of the group who conducts the audit. Experience shows that non-compliance is relatively low and often linked to practical registration problems (van der Akker, 2009; Hochreiter, 2011). In practice, those PGS that include reinforce responsibility, gender equity and social control, are generally as effective as third-party certification (Lemeilleur and Allaire, 2014). PGS offer a solution to the impasses linked to the need for detailed global standards and diverse local conditions (Vogl *et al.*, 2005). Consistency between principles and practices is prioritized in PGS and can counter the homogeneity imposed by the public standard.

While generally positively received, PGS is critiqued by movement actors. The local adaptation of the standard and audit rules could lead to heterogeneity, which if poorly managed, could increase confusion, asymmetric information, and eventually reduce confidence in organic production. However, this criticism is likewise leveled against third-party certification system (Baqué, 2012). Another critique refers to the inherent difficulties related to managing participatory processes that can generate tensions and hinders access for some producers. Finally, the effectiveness of participatory approaches depends heavily on the motivations and capacities (material, institutional and human) of different actors. There is no escaping knowledge asymmetries and balances of power (Lemeilleur and Allaire, 2014). The current political and institutional activities on PGS carried out by IFOAM and international organizations recognize these challenges.

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<sup>14</sup> Which was originally one of the objectives of CABO (Association of Independent Advisors in Organic Agriculture), one of the originators of the organic control system in France and which gave birth to Ecocert.

<sup>15</sup> Since each product must be certified, the cost of the audit is generally based on the number of products and activities (crop production, breeding, processing and/or sales) to be controlled.

Overall proponents of PGS, N&P in France, view it as a certification mechanism that is better suited to the holistic vision of organic. It is a work in progress rather than a recipe. However, unlike the TSR, PGS cannot claim exclusive legitimacy: some PGS are experimenting with hybrid systems, for example with the introduction of a third-party certification of the PGS groups (New Zealand, Bio Caledonia) or by requesting equivalence recognition with internal control systems (Van der Akker, 2009) in group certification. To Teil (2013), the coexistence between different certification mechanisms is desirable based on the principle of complementarity – i.e., there is a role for everyone and diverse logics in contributing to the development of organic. Nonetheless, we must be able to facilitate the dissemination and circulation of organic products with stable and comprehensible systems and to simultaneously allow organic agriculture to evolve in its transversal project.

## Conclusion

In the history of critiques of capitalism, the proposed alternatives have typically looked for transformative change either by replacing the existing system or building a parallel system that could push whole system change. Organic agriculture was originally part of this history, its identity was first built in parallel to the dominant paradigm of 'conventional' agriculture, and then in interaction with it. This interaction led to a compromise of coexistence where organic became an institutionalized niche market and one sustainability standard among many others. Radicals and reformers faced off so to reclaim the classic terminology. On one side, those who believed that the compromise would weaken the political and systemic project, and on the other side those who feared that the inability to reach a compromise would confine the movement to a comfortable and unthreatening margin of the dominant system. Organic agriculture, when considered as a public good and a political pathway for greening practices, remains the object of permanent revision and renewal among different societal actors (Allaire, 2016).

The history of organic tells the story first of a search for revindicated pluralism, then for homogeneity. In both stories the identity of organic is the plotline – how to define and implement this identity and how to audit it are what merge the political and market projects of the movement. Under the influence of the TSR, organic's critical and confrontational character has been marginalized. Nonetheless, organic actors (producers, processors, consumers, and others) mobilize alternative arrangements, such as PGS and private standards, to reclaim the 'true' organic and revindicate their pluralist critique. This plurality is both a strength and a source of tension; which in turn is used by the actors to position themselves between the logic of the market and sustainability standards, and the questioning of the current agri-food system paradigm. Organic is thus caught between the guarantee of predefined, objective, controlled criteria and an inclusive but unique political philosophy. In this sense organic has become a quality revealed by subjective judgment, but which wants to be "*a global action framework that subordinates other economic and social goals(...)*" (Teil, 2013, p.217).

The analysis presented in this chapter - on the organic TSR, the rise of private standards and PGS – has traced the weakening and reactivation of the critical dimension of the organic movement. Beyond simply coordinating supply chains and market segmentation, private standards might be vehicles for both defending the pluralist message and delivering a structural critique of current agri-food system. Along with PGS, which are built into some of these standards, they represent a critical structural element of the current movement that could enable actors to reclaim the organic identity. PGS put forward a vision that is coherent with the founding principles of the organic movement that revealed in the diversity of contexts, rather than the reductive homogeneity that is mostly linked to the governing model of the public organic standard. Yet while the attractiveness of PGS as a regulatory tool that is controlled by the movement itself is enticing as a solution, it is important not to forget that this tool itself cannot influence system change. The regulatory regimes and agricultural policy in general are just as important. Even though the share of organic farmers as a percentage of the total French farmers increased from 0.27% in 1989 to 4% in 2014 because of

specific organic regulation, the long-term success and sustainability cannot be achieved without a profound reform of the European and national agricultural policies and the creation of a system of incentives that are far more favorable to agriculture and food practices that are more respectful of balancing both ecological and socioeconomic needs of future generations.