



How do social movements shape organic food markets? Comparing the construction and institutionalization of Participatory Guarantee Systems in Brazil and France

Como os movimentos sociais formatam mercados para alimentos orgânicos? Comparando a construção e institucionalização de Sistemas Participativos de Garantia no Brasil e na França

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Abstract

Social movements have become central actors in the battles that are re-framing contemporary food markets in a variety of organizational and institutional configurations. With the aim of understand this process, this article contrasts the experiences of Nature & Progrès (France) and Ecovida Agroecology Network (Brazil). These movements are changing organic markets by means of Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), an innovative device created as a civic alternative to the conventional third-party audit. By crossing insights from New Economic Sociology and Social Movement Theory, we compare the two cases according to the social skills these movements have created to shape markets, including their alliances with State actors; the differentiated institutional contexts they face in each country; and the *modus operandi* established for each PGS. Results demonstrate that, while in both cases PGS has promoted a process of market re-institutionalization, Ecovida has been a more skillful actor in the market-making processes.

Keywords: *organic food; social movements; networks; markets; institutional change.*

Introduction

How social movements construct more sustainable food systems has long been a topic of interest among rural, economic and political sociologists. Original interpretations about the capacity of social activism to redefine economic orders through the construction of new markets have been at the heart of this literature. In agri-food studies, scholars have explored the transformative potential of market-oriented movements such as fair trade, organic, vegetarian, eco-friendly, ecological, and locavores (Raynolds, 2000; Renting et al., 2003; Wilkinson, 2007; Goodman, 2004). Analyses have been attracted by the repertoires of actions these movements create in order to defy the established rules and standards, which imposes market positions and hierarchies, by means of new institutional and socio-technical devices (Callon, 1998; Thévenot, 2001).

This article proposes a dialogue with middle-range theories that provides the means to understand how ‘movements as networks’ are acting to shape markets, and, more specifically, organic food markets. It addresses this debate by comparing two initiatives of Participatory Guarantee Systems that can help to explain how social movements are producing institutional change and, from this, shaping markets, using innovative devices based on interpersonal trust, experiential knowledge and reciprocal responsibilities. For that, we analyze the contrasting



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trajectories of Nature & Progrès (NP), in France, and Ecovida Agroecology Network (EAN), in Brazil – two of the most internationally known networks shaping organic food markets and founding members of national and global agroecology movements.

Combining results from three separate research projects carried out over the last five years in both countries and in international arenas, we conduct a comparative analysis of these two initiatives that answers the following research question: how are PGS institutionalized as part of market-making processes promoted by agroecology social movements? We draw upon interviews with farmers, consumers, market managers, vendors, processors, technicians, and policy makers; participant observation during social movement meetings; and we have followed the public debate about organic market normalization, as well as these actors in their everyday practices. The comparative analysis was based on a common analytical schema that includes: (a) the multi-level institutional context these movements have to face; (b) the main ‘social skills’ each movement has developed over time to frame relatively stable social networks and shape new markets (or re-frame the old ones); (c) the way each PGS operates concerning the social networking and market-making processes.

We argue that Brazilian and French cases exemplify two different trajectories of PGS institutionalization and alternative market construction. While NP illustrates a situation of limited skills to defy the mainstream institutionalization process of conventionalization and build new markets, Ecovida exemplifies a sort of ‘success history’. It is explained by three main factors. First, the ability Ecovida had to support an idea of ‘agroecology’ that defied the organic-centered referential (similarly to NP in France). Second, the way this movement took advantage of his closer connection with State actors (political skills) to shape a more suitable institutional frame, making more achievable the construction of new markets. Third, the more flexible *modus operandi* of the Ecovida’s PGS – allowed by the ‘weak constraints’ of the Brazilian institutional context – have facilitated the network expansion and, consequently, its capacity to move in the institutional battles.

The analytical framework

Sociology of Agriculture and Food is increasingly concerned about the collective strategies Social Movements use to build new markets, which operate with a different set of rules, standards and economic relationships. Some authors call them ‘civic markets’ (Cucco and Fonte, 2015) since they have been specifically oriented to answer collective demands of social movements, whether ecological (Organic), ethical (Fair Trade) or aesthetical (Geographical Indications). Other authors have begun to show that these types of markets are not isolated from each other, but are rather interdependent (Fouilleux and Loconto, 2017). This conceptualization poses a recurring question about how to understand the nexus of ‘nested institutions’ (Ostrom, 2009) that operate at different levels of jurisdiction. The ability of individual and collective actors to shape markets implies skills for handling institutions and the related material infrastructures.

Debates about the skills of these movements to change market orders have considered number of ‘repertoires of contention’ – protest-related tools and actions available to a movement (Tarrow, 2005). New tactics of mobilization and political opportunity structures have enabled the articulation not only of grievances, but also of alternate economic experiences. Therefore, these repertoires have evolved in response to changes in social, political and economic processes. Certainly, they were still built on ‘abeyance structures’



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(e.g., organizational and ideological continuity) fostered by diverse movements over the past fifty years. However, this notion is not sufficient to explain the new strategies and techniques, such as accountability politics (Konefal et al., 2007) or the institutional power of discourse (Schmidt, 2008). Neither is there a focus on the role of technology or socio-technical devices (such as certification) grounded in localized collective experiments of market-making.

To capture these missing elements, we complementarily draw upon Callon's (1998) notion of 'framing', because it captures the practice of "identifying overflows and containing them" (p. 248). The process of framing requires the active strategies of enrolling actors and entangling them in the network, which involve managing artifacts, values, meanings, identities and rules. The associations, interdependencies and irreversibilities that are created in the course of this process favor an institutional frame stabilization, but this is always a contentious situation, subject to criticism and change, which depends both on the political opportunity structures and the social movements' skills. From that starting point, our framework extracts the following three analytical axes as important for comparing the Brazilian and French processes of institutionalizing PGS: (a) the institutional battles that organic movements have to face; (b) the 'social skills' they have developed over time in order to (re)frame market interactions by way of PGS; (c) the *modus operandi* of each PGS as a calculation device that have effects for the networking process in terms of social movement enrollment and alliances.

Nature & Progrès

Created in 1964, NP emerged with the French ecological movement. Grounded in a strong nexus between farmers and consumers, NP has seen fluctuations in its membership reaching an apex of 1000 farmers and 7000 consumers in the 1980s. Following the regulation of organic agriculture at the European level in 1991, membership dropped to about 200 farmers in 1995 to reach 800 farmers and as many consumers in 2017. This movement instability might be explained by the effects produced by the new institutional frame, and, associated to that, the restricted skills NP has reached to challenge the new constraints. In recent years, the emergence of a new repertory of contention has favored innovative strategies that are enlarging the movement capacity to create new market alternatives, even though it is not necessarily under the organic standard.

In 2016, we can describe NP as a network of 27 departmental groups made up of 820 professionals (about 600 farmers and 200 processors or restaurants). Each group also convenes consumers (890 in 2016) who are also heavily involved in the elaboration of the standards, control, and decision-making procedures for certification. Finally, the federal council, a national technical advisory committee, draws up the specifications, while COMACs are established as decision-making bodies where representatives of the local groups define collective grades and standards.

Since 2011, 15 standards produced by NP have been recognized by IFOAM. Considering these standards are co-constructed between consumers and producers within national technical advisory committees, they respond to the values and practices of the community and are normally stricter than the European Organic standard. Specifically, they exceed the European standards on the size of livestock holdings, the link to the soil, the criteria of proximity in the origin of inputs, the composition of the processed products, etc. This democratic process is not, however, totally devoid of conflict, as many of the consumers



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prove to be even stricter than farmers on acceptable farming techniques (Lemeilleur and Allaire, 2016). The result is an incomplete institutional framing, which requires constant improvement in the NP certification device (or, in the factors of its calculation).

To be certified, a producer starts by making a request to a local group. On the first request, the producer is audited by local members with the support of the standard (including a charter and technical specifications). At the end of this visit, the local COMAC, composed of volunteers from the group – and in the presence of the auditors and the auditee – express an opinion about the conditions of the farmer's agroecological transition before certification. It is the management secretariat of the label at national level who gives (after a delay of six months) the final approval for the label. In all cases the farmer needs to adjust his production system and technical visits may be scheduled to support the process.

If there is no local group and producer members in the neighborhood, employees of the secretariat of the label may have to conduct the audit, but this is rare. Since farms are often very diversified and the whole farm must be compliant, audits are time-consuming (recording practices on each cropping and livestock system, processing and sales activities, and controlling invoices for inputs). Some local groups may decide to investigate some of the farming activities for one year and alternate the evaluation of other activities in the following year (Lemeilleur and Allaire, 2016).

The model of NP does not depend on public funds. It finances its activities and its permanent employees by the sale of its magazine, by membership fees, and by the cost of the audits certification (fixed cost for auditors' expenses and a small contribution on the turnover). The cost to the producer is based on time: a minimum contribution of two and a half days per year is expected: one to prepare the documents and host the visit, another to participate in a visit from another producer and a half day to participate in the COMAC. Producers are also encouraged to participate in the life of the association (events, fairs, local and national committees etc.). While there is little formal obligation to participate in the collective audits in order to be certified, producers view it as necessary. By consequence, some local groups have put in place incentives (e.g., reduction of membership fees) for producers participating in the audit visits (Lemeilleur and Allaire, 2016).

Despite its years of existence in the sector and its international recognition, NP is barely known and recognized in the national political sphere in France (Dorville, 2017). The hegemony of the public label has completely reduced NP's influence. From the point of view of consumers, it is also restricted to those consumers directly engaged in NP. The movement has neither developed an online sales platform nor physical market spaces. Each producer sells through their own sales network and the only national level negotiation that took place was with the Biocoop network. However, this network of specialized organic shops had excluded NP products from their shelves following the 1995 legislation. Recently, it reintroduced NP products on condition that the latter were produced within the local areas of each store (150 km), thereby reintroducing the products as local rather than strictly organic.

While other small local organizations have recently become interested in PGS and regularly use NP training, this does not create a wide social movement for citizen recognition of this form of participatory certification. Because of that, NP has weak partnerships with other similar organizations and agrarian movements. Only recently, it has started to amplify its political skills by means of collaboration with the International Federation of Community-Supported Agriculture, which can result in new localized markets to its members. Moreover, with a new Erasmus training program funded by the European Union in 2017, future citizen



entanglement of direct-to-consumer sales and other short circuits focused on local production will provide opportunities to link the movements and markets closer together.

Ecovida Agroecology Network

In Brazil, even though Ecovida was only constituted in 1998, this network results from the integration of several localized organizations, most of them created during the 1980s, when the Brazilian agricultural modernization policies started to be strongly criticized (Schneider and Niederle, 2010). As of 2017, EAN links almost 5000 family farms in the three southern Brazilian states (Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná). The remarkable expansion this movement has seen over the last few years was favored by a more flexible institutional frame in the Brazilian organic market, as well as the political skills Ecovida developed with the purpose of reacting to and influencing the framing process.

Ecovida synthesizes the confluence of local organizations that had already started to build a broad counter-movement to the 1970's agricultural modernization project. In the southern states of Brazil, where the effects of the Green Revolution were stronger than anywhere else in the country, these organizations produced interfaces between agrarian and ecological movements. Initially supported by international foundations and religious associations, they became able to legitimize a narrative about the unsustainability of conventional agriculture, and, from that, articulate socio-technical novelties to support small family farmers who had been excluded from the agricultural markets and public policies. Just a decade later, EAN was recognized by academics, governments and multilateral organizations as one of the most original experiences of alternative agriculture and market networking in Brazil.

Despite the pre-existence of these numerous ecological organizations, it was the European demand and the WTO liberalization agenda in the 1990s that pushed the institutionalization of a national organic food industry in Brazil. EAN was also formed in reaction to this, as an idea for articulating different local organizations who faced the risk of exclusion from the new public regulation for organic. One of the central components of this battle was the official recognition of a PGS, which, according to these organizations, had to meet both the new formal requirements for certification and be used as pedagogic tool to promote an agroecological transition. With the support of new center-left government elected in 2002, these movements strengthened their discourses and positions in the public arena, pressuring for adjustments in the institutional framework. From then on, even though Ecovida did not become an incumbent actor, controlling the production of institutions, it is a skillful and central actor in a de-centralized network configuration, at least comparatively to the NP situation in the French context.

Following WTO debates on markets and property rights, in 1995 the Brazilian government instituted the CNPO (National Committee of Organic Products), involving policy makers, researchers and NGOs. In 1998, this group produced the first standard that was submitted for public consultation. The discussion resulted in the Normative Instruction 07/1999, which defines 'organic' production, but without any characterization of certification mechanisms. This meant that they created a standard with reduced capacity to stabilize the emerging market. After disputes around 'organic' and 'agro-ecology' narratives (Petersen et al., 2013), a situation of more institutional stability was produced after the publication of the Law 10.831/2003 and, principally, the Decree 6.323/2007, which shaped the Brazilian System



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of Evaluation of Organic Conformity (SISOrg). This law recognized three official mechanism of evaluation: (i) Third-Party Audit, (ii) Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) and (iii) Social Control for direct-to-consumer sales (OCS).

In 2018, EAN links 5000 family farms in almost 200 municipalities of the three southern Brazilian states (Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná). These farmers are distributed in 300 community-based groups, which include 30 nuclei. It also involves 40 social organizations (associations, cooperatives and NGOs) and 8 consumer cooperatives. In order to participate, farmers and consumers need to create a 'group' (or to be accepted by a previously formed one). Made up of between 10 and 20 families, the group is the basic arrangement, in charge of the first stage of the participatory certification, the information and knowledge exchanges about agro-ecological farming, and market strategies. In turn, a 'nucleus' articulates several groups in a territory. This structure organizes the exchanges (of information and products) between local groups, an inter-group certification process (*Olhar Externo*), and, frequently, includes a formal cooperative or association, which manages the more extended markets (principally the contracts for public acquisition programs) and an inter-nucleus circuit that covers all the southern Brazilian region.

To comply with the Brazilian Law (Decree 6.323/2007), in 2009 the EAN was registered as an organism for participatory certification of organic food. Since then, the Ecovida Association for Participatory Certification became the formal face of the network, in charge of the certification process. The process starts with the co-responsibility of the group, which has to control and solve any potential problem and/or to communicate it to the nucleus (in a semiannual plenary of groups' representatives). This is one of the reasons why the communitarian (group) and territorial (nucleus) logic is so important for this kind of system. In some way, it creates an everyday process of control by neighbors. Conversely, in some regions where there is no group constituted, the entry of new farmers in distant groups is now defying this logic, demanding a more effective action of the inter-group external control.

Directly linked to the certification system, another reason for the network expansion is the possibility of accessing several markets created by Ecovida's groups. Among all of them, farmers' street-markets are still the most traditional and important, even though it does not necessarily represent a significant part of the products sold. First of all, this circuit is an expression of resilience for agro-ecology transition strategies, which means a safer alternative in case of crisis in any other market. Secondly, it is a sort of hotspot for the entire network, sustaining the scaling-up process. Frequently, it is from these circuits that farmers start to build larger connections, including other forms of direct-to-consumer sales (on farm purchase; food baskets) as well as the contact with stores and restaurants. The fairs are also used to exchange products within the network (from one farmer to another, from one group or nucleus to another), in order to assure quantity and diversity of products for all circuits. Besides products, they are also spaces for information, knowledge and political exchange. They are the most important 'political circuit', used to communicate values and principles, both in discourses and material artifacts (labels, flyers, bamboo stalls, ecological packaging).

Contrasting NP and EAN experiences

Although the construction of any market requires a relatively stable institutional context, this process is much more contingent than the literature usually considers. Institutions are not entities that, amid the continuous flow of social change, remain relatively hard, inflexible, or



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incorruptible (Boltanski, 2009). Institutions themselves are subjected to processes of re-institutionalization in order to keep their boundaries and to avoid crumbling in the face of dynamic reality (Niederle, 2017). According to our approach, the manner in which institutions handle uncertainty, tension and criticism in order to stay alive requires socio-technical devices, such as certification schemes. Considering the fact that these devices also ‘produce partial and impermanent orderings and never complete ones’ (Busch, 2011, p. 6), we can explain why markets present permeable borders, through which actors and objects can pass. Under certain circumstances, this switchover creates criticism, protest and, finally, social change. In other cases, it will just produce weak adaptations in practices and discourses.

Callon’s ‘frame-overflows’ analysis allow us to highlight the effort social movements make to frame a set of rules, standards and technical devices so to allow them to shape food markets. New ‘alternative’ markets have become expressions of a value-based idea that is currently melding with ‘agroecology’, which embraces food sovereignty, preference for local food and short supply chains, and an ethic of care concerning society-nature relations. In this paper, we identified institutional battles, where social movements make efforts to resist the disempowering effects produced by the institutionalization process carried out by the State, under pressures of corporate interests. In these battles, PGS became a device created and supported for the purpose of engage actors in a movement-network that sought to ‘overflow’ the mainstream framing. This is in line with Wilkinson’s (2010) analysis of organic farmers going ‘beyond organic’ to focus on the societal challenge of an agroecological transition. More than a certification schemes, PGS is an institutional and technical device used to (re)frame market orders.

One of the most significant points of comparison between the movements we analyzed concerns the fact that both were able to create repertoires of collective action that improved their capacity to (re)institutionalize markets. For that, in both cases, the central device was the PGS, which has enabled NP and EAN to act with a flexible network-based organizational structure - even though EAN focuses on more distributed coordination whereas NP is more centralized (indeed reflecting national institutional structures). On the one hand, not only the PGS, but all organizational and institutional structures linked to it, has improved movements’ skills to deal with market exigencies in terms of scale, costs, variety, quality and prices, as a very modern capitalist organization. On the other hand, it allows them to assume the face of a political actor, which implies not only their contentious capacities, but also the articulation with other collective actors, including those from state, to sustain civic principles that shape value-based markets.

The results of this process differ in our cases – both in the precise way movements operate and in the institutions and markets that they navigate. For instance, while the Ecovida experience seems to be more promising in relation to the variety of alternative food markets that have been generated over only a decade (from street markets to public procurement), the NP network might be characterized by a higher density of social relations, which suggests a long-term commitment between producers and consumers in uncoordinated markets. Indeed, the presence of consumers as active members of the movement is almost restricted to the French case. For the Brazilian experience, it is just an ‘imagined future’ (Beckert, 2016), for which EAN is starting to articulate its actions with other social movements such as Slow Food.

Here it is crucial to contrast, on the one hand, the capacity of these actors to frame social action. One of the most notorious differences between the two cases is the stronger ability EAN has shown to produce cooperation among private actors, to engage other



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ecological and agrarian movements and State actors, to its project. It has allowed this network not only to assure the formal recognition of PGS by the Brazilian State and public policies to support the process – which includes acceptance of PGS in public procurement – but also to inspire other movements, such as the agrarian Landless Workers' Movement (MST) to develop their own PGS devices. In effect, recently, even some of the biggest supermarket chains, which had been critical about the reliability of this system, no longer distinguish between PGS and third-party certification. However, this overflow process also becomes an externally and internally contested result (and a wish for re-framing). Externally, by certification enterprises and other actors who see the end of a profitable market segmentation (and a risk of de-stabilization of the former 'social pact'). Internally, by Ecovida's members themselves, who see the sale of their agro-ecological food in supermarkets as a form of conventionalization. As with NP in France and elsewhere, we are seeing a new cycle of activities through the resurgence of local food markets.

Despite strong private alliances between producers and consumers in France, NP has faced far more difficulties in moving into the public arena and get success in institutional battles. Contrarily to the Brazilian case, in France (and Europe) the institutionalization process has reduced NP's capabilities to shape organic food markets. It appears that NP has a strong capacity for framing its own institutional arrangements of rules and values, but not for overflows (either controlling them or expanding them). Here the strength of the enrollments has strengthened the movements' ability to separate itself in the market, but not to become part of the largest network that shapes the markets.

At the international level, NP and EAN interact and play prominent roles in the promotion of PGS, especially at IFOAM. In these arenas, different political strategies and institutional logics make it difficult to produce a common international rule and, therefore, to create a system of mutual recognition of PGS among countries – blocking any attempt of these movements to use this device for organic food exportation (Lemelleur and Allaire, 2016). NP has invested its repertoires of action at the local rather than the international level, in particular through the creation of stricter standards and standards for many unregulated products that are produced organically. These strategies are evident in the shape of their network and markets (private, local and domestic).

Ecovida was much more reactive to the national institutionalization process, based on international export market pressures, especially in the beginning. At that moment, formal recognition of PGS was seen as a potential alternative for small and family farmers to the exclusionary export organic market. In Brazil there was a clear political opportunity for inserting these concerns into national public debate (with support from regional and international social movements). In both cases, we can see that the PGS, as an innovative institutional and socio-technical device, was fundamental of each networks' framing strategies. The result of this particular form of standardization is more variety in the organic markets where producers and consumers interact – at least for now.

Conclusions

Framing always produces exclusion. Because of this, we generally see contesting processes, criticism and, sometimes, social change. The notion of 'overflow' denotes the 'impossibility of total framing.' (Goodman et al., 2012, p. 102). Thus, institutionalization becomes a much more contradictory, uncertain and dynamic process. Social movements are central actors catalyzing this dynamic, not only concerning the historic relations they establish



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with the State, but also because they have already become central actors for market ordering. In the many sectors, is it difficult to ignore social movements' skills to re-frame markets. In agri-food sector, in particular, these actors have long been experimenting with markets and new institutions as means to contest (and work around) the industrial and mercantile project endorsed by the Green Revolution.

As demonstrated above, NP and EAN share several principles concerning the efforts to introduce different values in market orders. Promotion of sustainability, local food, family farming, and short supply chains are just few examples of common values. It is also related to an analogous defense of a political-oriented definition of 'agroecology' as an alternative to what both organizations consider a reductionist technical-oriented 'organic' notion. However, considering that they operate with different organizational structures and they are embedded in diverse institutional contexts, not only are their skills to shape markets differently, but their results as well. One of the most notorious differences is the ability EAN has presented to engage other ecological and agrarian movements, as well as State actors, to conform a wide political coalition. This has allowed this movement not only to assure the formal recognition of PGS, but also the production of public policies that have catalyzed new markets. While NP has also been very active in the international definition and promotion of PGS, its domestic influence in market institutions has been less successful.

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