



Values, conventions, innovation and sociopolitical struggles in a local food system: Conflict between organic and conventional farmers in *Sierra de Segura*

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1. Introduction

In the past few years, quality has played a central role in the redefinition of the prevalent forms of food production and consumption, particularly in the case of Alternative Food Networks (AFN) and Local Food Systems (LFS) (Goodman, 2003; Goodman and Goodman, 2009). Quality productions are not only a result of the different standards embodied in contracts (Sykuta and Cook, 2001) and certification frameworks (Busch and Bain, 2004; Mutersbaugh, 2005). Nevertheless, Convention Theory (CT) understands quality as tacit social agreements supported by different repertoires of justification (Eymard-Duvernay, 1989). Consequently, quality food productions and, specifically, the definition of their distinctive criteria are frequently related to relevant social conflicts (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Levkoe, 2014).

Sometimes, the development of quality productions is unavoidable because of the low margins and profits of mainstream agriculture, particularly in lagged and peripheral regions (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998; Ilbery et al., 2005). It is the case for low-yielding mountain olive groves, such as *Sierra de Segura* in Spain (Alonso-Mielgo et al., 2001; Coq-Huelva et al., 2012; Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2012). *Sierra de Segura* is also particularly relevant because of its specific features in terms of ecology and landscape

(Sanz-Cañada et al., 2015). *Sierra de Segura* is not an isolated case of a quality approach. However, since 2000, there has been a multiplication of the initiatives of Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) in Spain, which is the world's main olive producer with a global share of approximately 30%. PDO initiatives currently represent 30.6% of Spanish olive croplands.¹

Nevertheless, there are different forms of approaching and developing quality in olive oil local food system. In this article, we will try to show that *Sierra de Segura* is an example of different quality approaches that, on the one hand, are supported by different normative frameworks and, on the other hand, have different environmental and socio-economic effects. In *Sierra de Segura*, the majority of farmers have been involved in a process of differentiation supported by a PDO. At the same time, a smaller number of farmers have refused this approach and have developed a specific approach to quality based on organic production.

The present paper attempts to analyse the co-existence of these two different and opposing approaches within an LFS, emphasising the fact that conflicts must be explained not only as the result of different economic interests, but also as a consequence of opposing values and different paths of discursive mobilisation. We also consider that CT is particularly useful for addressing conflicts because it recognises the diversity of agents' normative frameworks and embedded rationalities (Batifoulie and Larquier, 2001; Eymard-Duvernay et al., 2006; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005; Ponte, 2009). In this sense, using a set of infrequently applied conventionalist concepts (such as compromises, *critiques* or clashes) possibly constitutes one of the main contributions of this article.

The theorisation of conflict inside LFS is essential to avoid falling into a kind of local trap, or "defensive localism," focused on the homogeneity of local agents and on the idealisation of the relations of production and consumption (Hinrich, 2003; Born and Purcell, 2006; Purcell and Brown, 2008). In contrast, locality and quality will be approached in this article as places for innovation and sites of different kinds of struggles with a relevant normative and

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¹ Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Environment.

political substrate.

There is a wide range of relations between organic and conventional farmers (Constance et al., 2015). Necessarily, there is a certain degree of conflict in the promotion of new forms of agrarian production and farm management. However, there is also a relevant rapprochement between organic and conventional production. This process could be considered a compromise in terms of CT (Lockie and Halpin, 2005; Constance et al., 2015). In this article, we hope to contribute to the discussion of the relevance of normative issues in the construction of compromises around organic production.

Additionally, compromises, *critiques* and clashes are understood in this article to be strong discursive devices. The definition of organic production also has a relevant discursive element (Campbell and Liepins, 2001). As we will analyse, one essential element in the conflict between organic and conventional olive farmers in *Sierra de Segura* involves their capacity to generate paths of discursive mobilisation. In this context, we will also underline the role played by Alternative Food Movements (AFM) and producer and consumer networks in the generation of new discourses and forms of coordination (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Levkoe and Wakefield, 2014).

Our paper is organised in the following manner: in the next section, the theoretical framework of our research is presented. In the first part the role of quality in the current organisation of the food chain is briefly presented. In the second part, the main and better-known concepts of CT, such as worlds and Higher Common Goods (HCG), are introduced. The third part emphasises the presentation of less-well-known concepts of CT, such as *critique*, clash, or compromise. The next section presents the main traits of the *Sierra de Segura* LFS and the research methodology. The subsequent sections (4–6) analyse the different conventions and compromises within conventional and organic olive oil production in *Sierra de Segura*. First, we study those dominant in farm management (section 4), and then we analyse those operating in the governance of the PDO and first- and second-degree cooperatives (sections 5 and 6). Finally, section 7 presents the main conclusions, focusing on the effects of compromises and *critiques* on the governance of conventional and organic quality strands.

2. Quality, food chains and coordination and conflicts: conventions, compromises and critiques

2.1. Quality and food chains: innovation as a socio-political issue

Food chains are complex forms of organisation simultaneously presenting relations of power, collaboration, dominance and subordination of some agents over others (Gibbon et al., 2010; Marsden et al., 2000). In the past few decades, food chains have undergone dramatic processes of transformation and complexification as a result of rapid changes in global diet and food relations (Dixon, 2009). Thus, since the 1980s, there has been an increasingly greater demand for quality food (McMichael, 2009; Friedmann, 2005). Quality has generated new spaces for capital accumulation between a majority sector of “food from nowhere” and a minority sector of “food from somewhere” (Friedmann, 2005; Campbell, 2009).

Among the multiple ways in which quality is governed, one of the most successful and extended approaches has been certification (Busch and Bain, 2004; Barham and Sylvander, 2011). Nevertheless, certification is not only a technical issue but also a social construct (Dubuisson-Quellier et al., 2011). In this context, multiple certifications must be seen as an option related to the diversity of agents’ interests and to their distinct cognitive and normative frameworks (Loconto, 2010).

The increasing segmentation of food markets offers a new set of collectively generated processes for innovation that not only depend on the development of firms’ entrepreneurial features but on social capabilities for exploiting market opportunities (Morris and Young, 2000; Levkoe, 2014). Therefore, innovation must be understood as the consequence of socio-political struggles among different groups in diverse domains.

As social innovation depends on collective behaviour, coordination among agents cannot be explained exclusively in terms of infra-socialised individual rationalities, but in a broader way. In a context of uncertainty, systems of values are not only an alternative way of driving individual actions but also allow the anticipation of agents’ behaviour, thus allowing coordination. Therefore, systems of values constitute unavoidable sources for understanding agents’ coordination and embedded rationalities (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991[2006]; Eymard-Duvernay et al., 2006). In contrast, value disagreements and the subsequent social conflicts can represent a central issue for innovation. Social innovation can emerge but also fail because of the inherently conflictive nature of the associated political processes, which are related to changes in agents’ power equilibrium (Lockie and Halpin, 2005).

2.2. Coordination and competition in food chains: worlds and higher common goods in the convention theory approach

CT is a model for addressing agents’ socio-economic behaviour in which there is no effective contradiction between the ethical and the rational, between the search for individual and for collective interests, enabling exclusively rationalistic perspectives of social action to be overcome (Hodgson, 1988; Wilkinson, 1997). Conventions are social agreements that place the behaviour patterns of agents within a social framework, thus enabling coordination.

In the seminal work of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991[2006]), broad ethical-philosophical frameworks are defined as “worlds” and conceived as general social constructions addressing the regulation of a wide range of social relations and providing differential values for objects and individuals. Three fundamental and interrelated concepts are essential for their definition. First, the HCG is a normative principle that prioritises certain behaviours and objects over others. Second, “repertoires of justification” comprise a set of socially accepted elements that serve as “intermediaries” for interpreting the meaning attributed to different objects and behaviours. Finally, “worlds” are based on two partially opposed axioms. The first one refers to the principle of “common humanity”, which ensures that all individuals have, *a priori*, the possibility of accessing and occupying the most elevated positions in the social hierarchy. The second is “differentiation”, which acts in exactly the opposite way, enabling the generation of a concrete social ordination in each of the worlds.²

Boltanski and Thévenot (1991[2006]) identified six different worlds which have been broadly applied in the academic literature discussing quality and governance of agro-food chains (Ponte 2009, 2016; Rosin and Campbell 2009; Evans 2011; Andersen 2011; Bernzen and Brown, 2014). However, a relevant part of this literature has focused mainly on only four of these worlds (Eymard-Duvernay 1989; Renard, 2003; Ponte and Gibbon 2005, Cidell and Alberts 2006; Kirwan 2006; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2010; Campbell and Rosin 2011). Furthermore, conventionalist

² Terms in this paragraph are direct quotes from the fifth chapter of the English translation of Boltanski and Thévenot 1991(2006) On justification: Economies of worth.

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