



The social practice of sustainable agriculture under audit discipline: Initial insights from the ARGOS project in New Zealand[☆]

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One of the most interesting recent developments in global agri-food systems has been the rapid emergence and elaboration of market audit systems claiming environmental qualities or sustainability. In New Zealand, as a strongly export-oriented, high-value food producer, these environmental market audit systems have emerged as an important pathway for producers to potentially move towards more sustainable production. There have, however, been only sporadic and fractured attempts to study the emerging social practice of sustainable agriculture - particularly in terms of the emergence of new audit disciplines in farming. The ARGOS project in New Zealand was established in 2003 as a longitudinal matched panel study of over 100 farms and orchards using different market audit systems (e.g., organic, integrated or GLOBALG.A.P.). This article reports on the results of social research into the social practice of sustainable agriculture in farm households within the ARGOS projects between 2003 and 2009. Results drawn from multiple social research instruments deployed over six years provide an unparalleled level of empirical data on the social practice of sustainable agriculture under audit disciplines. Using 12 criteria identified in prior literature as contributing a significant social dynamic around sustainable agriculture practices in other contexts, the analysis demonstrated that 9 of these 12 dimensions did demonstrate differences in social practices emerging between (or co-constituting) organic, integrated, or conventional audit disciplines. These differences clustered into three main areas: 1) social and learning/knowledge networks and expertise, 2) key elements of farmer subjectivity - particularly in relation to subjective positioning towards the environment and nature, and 3) the role and importance of environmental dynamics within farm management practices and systems. The findings of the project provide a strong challenge to some older framings of the social practice of sustainable agriculture: particularly those that rely on paradigm-driven evaluation of social motivations, strong determinism of sustainable practice driven by coherent farmer identity, or deploying overly categorical interpretations of what it means to be 'organic' or 'conventional'. The complex patterning of the ARGOS data can only be understood if the social practice of organic, integrated or (even more loosely) conventional production is understood as being co-produced by four dynamics: subjectivity/identity, audit disciplines, industry cultures/structure and time. This reframing of how we might research the social practice of sustainable agriculture opens up important new opportunities for understanding the emergence and impact of new audit disciplines in agriculture.

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1. Introduction

This article provides a summary of social research findings from the first stage of the long-term Agriculture Research Group on Sustainability (ARGOS) Project in New Zealand. Within the transdisciplinary framework of the project, the key research question for the social scientists addressed the extent to which new market audit systems (like certified organic or GLOBALG.A.P.) helped to define the social dynamics of the commercial farms using them. This focus enabled us to address the paucity of empirical material available on the social dynamics of farm households undertaking

certified organic or other 'sustainability' audited systems of production. The analysis of the resulting data further exposed and provided a means to reduce a gap in the sociological narrative of sustainable agriculture that has, it will be argued, failed to adequately conceptualise these audit systems as rapidly emerging mechanisms that discipline significant segments of the global agri-food system. The general lack of in-depth empirical social research into farm households adopting sustainability audit systems also limits the capability of social researchers to assess the validity of wider public claims by the likes of Michael Pollan that commercialised organic agriculture has 'sold out' or now significantly mimics conventional agricultural systems both economically and socially.¹ In other words, has the introduction of audit disciplines in order to secure 'sustainability' claims in alternative food chains significantly, and negatively, changed the social character of alternative approaches like organic agriculture as clearly implied by such claims?

This article, therefore, examines the social dynamics and practices emerging around the sustainability audits that are appearing in food supply chains around the world.² It does so by drawing on data from the ARGOS project – arguably the largest current study into farm-level sustainability in the world – which has been gathering social, economic and ecological data on over 100 farms and orchards in New Zealand since 2003 (www.argos.org.nz). The data from this project provide a compelling resource for evaluating the social (and ecological and economic) dynamics associated with the disciplining of commercial-scale family farms by market audit systems. The resulting complex picture of social practices under different audit disciplines fills some key gaps in the empirical narrative of the social practice of sustainable agriculture and, in the process, establishes a strong challenge to the framing and mobilisation of such social practices in some existing analytical frameworks.

2. The social practice of sustainable agriculture under audit

One of the most compelling aspects of recent transformations of global agri-food systems has been the emergence of audit culture as an important new form of food governance. Responding to these changes, a range of scholars have attempted to understand the dynamics, scope and implications of these audits and the disciplining they operationalise in agri-food systems (see Busch and Bain, 2004; Campbell, 2005; Hatanaka et al., 2005; Henson and Reardon, 2005; Jahn et al., 2005; Fulponi, 2006; Rosin, 2008). The conclusion reached by all these scholars is that food audits, standards, grades and protocols are among the most influential and theoretically interesting new dynamics within contemporary agri-food systems – particularly those involving high-value markets or supplying high-end retailers in regions like Europe and Japan. The new audit disciplines have, in part, developed in parallel with the deployment of sustainability claims in high-value food products. Certified organic agriculture offers an early example of this new food audit culture and key associated features: the implication of values associated with sustainability, the use of third party certification, strong linkages to both a long-term social movement as well as the new strategies of multiple retailers, and rapid growth in high-value markets (Campbell and Le Heron, 2007). Alongside

certified organic, a parallel body of standards and audits has emerged around 'integrated' systems³ designed to supply multiple retailers with branded products that can support claims of 'sustainable' and 'safe' production without being specifically organic. The most notable of these has been the EurepGAP (now GLOBALG.A.P.) audit alliance, which has rapidly spread among European retailers (Campbell, 2005).

The increasing importance of these new audits, grades, standards and certification processes as features of agri-food systems raises the key question that will be the focus of this article. Namely, for farmers and orchardists, what is the distinguishing social character of being certified 'organic' or 'integrated' as compared to 'conventional'? This question is approached from two distinct perspectives: a) what are the social practices that influence the engagement of farmers/growers with these audit systems as disciplining mechanisms, and b) how are the social characteristics of, and social practices in and around, farm households and farm decision-makers both influenced by and structuring of the outcomes of the introduction of these systems?

A small body of literature has engaged with specific aspects of the social practice of sustainable agriculture more generally. The work of scholars like Meares (1997), Peter et al. (2000) and Liepins (1995) raised the importance of gender dynamics in the context of sustainable agriculture. Similar questions have been raised about grower identity/subjectivity (Burton, 2004a, 2004b; Bell, 2004), subjective positioning towards the environment (Wilson, 1996; Holloway, 2002), acquisition of skill and construction of knowledge (Hassanein, 1999; Morgan and Murdoch, 2000), community networks and social capital (Flora, 2001; Lyson, 2004), and farming styles (Vanclay et al., 2006). Together, these create an initial impression of what kind of social practices might be associated with farm householders and decision-makers engaged in sustainable agriculture. This includes dynamics around: farm decision-making, social networks, learning styles and approaches, subjective positioning around key issues like the importance of the farm environment, willingness to trade-off environmental and economic goals and the influence of social factors on management decisions around farm production. Together, these form the outlines of what, for the purposes of this article, we term the 'social practice' of sustainable agriculture. By using the term social practice, we are intentionally moving beyond the descriptive quality of social 'characteristics' of farm households and individuals engaged in sustainable agriculture by seeking to also understand the dynamic quality of: decision-making, social networks, learning, subjectivities, management approaches and embodied activities as they are practiced, enacted and reproduced within and around farm households. We are particularly interested with such social practice in the context of audit disciplined approaches to sustainable farm management.

3. After ACAP: reframing social practice in sustainable agriculture

If we permit the idea that there is or are multiple bodies of social practice associated with the emergence of sustainable agriculture, how do we start to assemble a framework to assess the means through which these practices are influencing (and are influenced

¹ For a fuller discussion of the implications of Pollan's 'Organic Industrial Complex' (Pollan, 2001) see Campbell and Rosin (2011).

² For the purposes of this discussion, the term 'audit' is used to designate a broad cluster of dynamics around inspection, certification, standards, protocols, traceability systems, along with their associated labelling and branding claims that make up what Power (1997) calls 'audit culture'.

³ Commencing with protocols around Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and the goal of low-residue products, audit systems like EurepGAP/GLOBALG.A.P. evolved to incorporate a range of measures and dimensions beyond those originally encapsulated in IPM. While significant in scope and scale, these new and elaborating environmental audit systems have yet to be ascribed a stable collective noun. For this article, the term 'integrated' is used as a brief descriptor of this emerging group of post-IPM, environmental (but non-organic) certification systems.

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