

Ecolabeling as a Sustainability Strategy for Smallholder Farming? The Emergence of Participatory Certification Systems in Brazil

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Abstract

This article explores the emergence of ecolabeling of organic products in the context of the contemporary debate on global risks related to food production and consumption, focusing in particular on the implications for smallholder farming in Brazil. Independent certification is sustained by technical and bureaucratic mechanisms, sanctioned by international organizations and multilateral agencies whose power structures encourage the production of rules and systems of enforcement. By contrast, local food movements and civil society initiatives point to the emergence of alternative, participatory forms of ecolabeling. These local organizations have come up with new ways of constructing collective quality seals and assurances for products. They have spurred debates on the technologies, power structures and risks associated with corporate agriculture, large-scale pesticide use and chemically grown produce. As an alternative, ecolabeling requires a multi-level articulation of smallholder farming, food cooperatives and farmer markets, in order to create a local certification system for eco-sustainable produce and maintain the sustainability of traditional modes of existence of small farmers. Grounded in a long-term ethnographic study among ecological family farming in the western region of Santa Catarina, Brazil, this paper examines ecolabeling legal frameworks both globally and locally. It highlights the complexity of the eco-labeling process in Brazil, a context where diverse farmers' movements, non-governmental organizations and technical and State political actors grapple with questions relating to the social and economic values of sustainable organic agriculture. The data presented here is based on bibliographical, documental research and analysis of laws, decrees and norms. The study examines the recent historical process involving certification rules and regulations, especially those affecting agriculture. It also surveys the literature on the topic, bringing to light interpretive variations and other cases offering a contrast to Brazil's experience.

Keywords: ecolabeling, organic agriculture, social participation, food risks

1. Introduction

Contemporary disputation on global risks and food safety issues, linked to food production and consumption, has mobilized civil society and stimulated important demands. However, it seems insufficient, and perhaps even naïve, to assume that organic and eco-social certification have emerged solely out of a growing engagement with some of the major issues of our times: the depletion of the environment, the unrestricted use of polluting substances, the need for better and sustainable agricultural practices, a better consumer information about the concerns over health risks and the quality of products in general. The international standardization of technical rules on commercial products emerged in the aftermath of World War II, when the United Nations system and an array of multilateral organizations and international agencies were created. The International Standardization Organization (ISO), instituted in 1947, played a leading role in the emergence of a system of technical norms, establishing international criteria and standards designed to boost the global circulation of commodities. It is worth noting that, in the same year, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was signed by various nations and became a landmark for resuming global economic relations, as well as a central vector in the political rearrangements that took place during the post-war period.

Issues and demands raised by civil society – along with a set of concerns that we could, for simplicity's sake, group under the term 'environmentalism' (and its variants) – are nevertheless an important part of this process.

Studies have shown that ecolabeling practices originated in localized relationships between farmers and consumers. Their aim was to introduce guarantees for production based on environmentally sustainable techniques, generating formats that were less about labels and formal certificates and more about economies of proximity (Guthman, 2004; Altieri & Nicholls, 2008, for a critical perspective). Nonetheless, the growing international centrality of norms, criteria and regulations has also led to ecolabeling, becoming an effective mechanism since it is supported by the same parameters of control, (self-)discipline and inspection – central elements of contemporary ‘audit culture’ (Strathern, 2000), safety policies and risk management.

Nation states have generally delegated responsibility for ecolabeling to private agencies. Fostered by a concern with fraud or counterfeit goods, as well as with the contamination of food by harmful substances or non-authentic produce, this model officially ‘accredited’ produce through a form of certification based on rigorous, bureaucratic and impartial inspection, scientific knowledge and a technical division of labor. This helped consolidate the model of inspection known as third-party certification.

Furthermore, especially when it comes to organic food ecolabels, social movements and civil society organizations claim that the third-party verification system fails to provide real conditions for social change and environmental sustainability. Faced with a bureaucratic, costly and normative system, these organizations have responded by working collectively to develop participatory guarantee systems (PGS), for the concession of labels (IFOAM, 2007a and b). This movement points to the growth of ecolabeling and the construction of alternative forms of accreditation systems in various parts of the world. Fonseca (2007) defines participatory guarantee systems as “*a set of activities developed within a particular organizational structure, guided by principles, organizational and operational norms, which seeks to guarantee that a product (a term that also includes processes and services) complies with the technical regulations of organic agriculture and that has been subject to participatory assessment.*” In general, participatory ecolabeling systems do not establish any division between verifiers and verified, in fact, and guarantees are provided through collective accountability and participatory inspections by those directly involved, as well as by partner social actors: consumers and political or technical mediators.

Grounded in a long-term ethnographic study among ecological family farming in the western region of Santa Catarina, Brazil (Radomsky, 2010), the purpose of the present paper is to focus and analyze the world-wide emergence of organic ecolabeling in the context of contemporary debates on global risks, in particular seeking to understand the implications of these processes for Brazil. We examine how internal and external socio-political articulations and disputes have shaped ecolabeling processes in this Nation. Presenting the different interpretations of ecolabels expounded in the academic literature, we also discuss how political, scientific and moral conflicts are configured and how justifications are posed in such a way that labeling comes to be seen as indispensable to global economic order, as well as debates on risk. The methodological procedures employed in the study are based on the analysis of documents (laws, decrees, norms) and of recent historical processes involving certification norms and regulations, especially those concerning agriculture. The article also examines the literature on the topic in order to highlight interpretive variations and cases offering a contrast to Brazil’s experience.

Following on from this introduction, the next section discusses various social theories of ecolabeling, proposing a comprehensive distinction between four interpretive frameworks. The study proceeds exploring the aspects related to risk and audit policies in light of recent interpretations. The fourth section presents a specific case to illustrate the arguments developed over the course of this study: the process of internalization and appropriation of ecolabeling models and international norms by Brazilian laws and regulations. It ends with some concluding remarks.

2. Discussion

2.1 Social Theory and Certification

In one of the most comprehensive studies of ecolabeling published to date, Boström and Klintman (2008) define green labels as “*markers that are presented to consumers or professional purchasers and are assumed to help to distinguish environmentally beneficial consumer choices from ‘conventional’ ones*”. The authors argue that “*as a kind of eco-standardization, green labeling is based on the standardization of principles and prescriptive criteria. This type of eco-standard is market-based and consumer-oriented and it relies on symbolic differentiation*” (ibid: 28). Ecolabels are therefore based on criteria for assessing production processes and employ different standards, as the baselines for granting certificates of conformity. As instruments for informing consumers about the characteristics and specificities of products, certification ends up materialized as brands or labels. In fact, as Boström and Klintman (ibid: 175) assert, they “*translate social and environmental complexity into a categorical*

label.”

The debates surrounding certification have a history of their own, exploring the specific conditions that have shaped their emergence. These have included the multiplication and expansion of the fields where they are applied and their harmonization at international level, as a tool of governance and accountability (see, for example, Bostrom & Garsten, 2008; Silva-Castañeda, 2012) and public policy (Mansfield, 2004), with implications for social participation (Gonzalez & Nigh, 2005).

Studies of ecolabeling can be fitted into four main interpretive frameworks: (i) labels as marketing, information, and an agency in market competition; (ii) the politics of certification; (iii) certification and labels as a (re)connection with the genuine and search for authenticity; and (iv) the multiple functions of labels.

According to the first interpretive framework, certification is a market instrument designed to correct informational asymmetries between producers and consumers. For Rubik and Frankl (2005), labels are a tool of commercial efficiency that foster a sense of trust that, in turn, allows markets expand by providing safe and reliable information on products and processes. These authors regard the generalization of labels for different industrial sectors and types of products as an outcome of the systematization process specific to the certification system. As well as acting as a vector for commercial information, labels became a marketing strategy for reaching a variety of consumer ‘niches.’

The informational asymmetry between producers and consumers is a persistent feature of markets; in this sense, labeling functions, as a tool for redressing the imbalance between these two poles, reflecting the importance of standardization at local and global scales (Damboriarema, 2001; Zarrilli *et al.*, 1997) and of the sustainable management and message awareness conveyed by the labels (Font, 2001; Buckley, 2001).

Appleton (2001) pursues a slightly different line of analysis. While stressing the importance of information for markets (especially in order to guarantee consumer access to safe food items), he simultaneously emphasizes the possibility of a politics associated with labeling. Even so, his interpretation still evokes a market mechanism in which non-certified producers must depend on some kind of formal guarantee, if they are to avoid being spurned by consumers. In other words, compliance and audit systems are beneficial to the economy. Through the widespread use of labeling, he argues, consumers adopt more proactive and ‘conscious’ stances. Analyses along these lines take the market for granted: it is the system that ensures the optimal efficiency of exchanges and resource allocations. The market is seen as enabling, and ecolabeling an unproblematic device for regulating social asymmetries and information deficiencies (see also Grote *et al.*, 2007). In this case, ecolabels have the potential to de-mystify the imprecision and imperfection of information. Ecolabeling itself is not rendered problematic, though, and certification processes are taken to be a ‘natural’ outcome of the global economy.

A different point of view is implied in the notion of a politics of certification or ecolabeling: power lies in the hands of consumers, who make rational use of the information provided by labeling. The essential aspect here is the anteriority of the power relations that conditions ecolabeling: the market is the moment of actualization, not the singular locus where free relations occur. Boström and Klintman (2008) suggest that labels are “*substitutes for our senses and first-hand knowledge. They provide us with mediated transparency*”, operating, therefore, through mediation. But what kind of mediation? In a word, that recognized as scientific. Scientists are the actors responsible for certifying and verifying products, writing and submitting technical opinions and reports on their quality or compliance. In this sense, a simple belief in labeling turns into a dangerous ‘epistemological absolutism,’ because, as these authors are at pains to emphasize, *certification is not strictly scientific*. Even if the methodologies were strictly science-based, this would not preclude a public debate over their uses. Refuting those authors who see the market instrument as primordial, Boström and Klintman argue that the political foundations shaping production and norms are often forgotten, along with what labeling enables: a symbolic differentiation with expressive economic effects, legitimized by a particular kind of knowledge.

Drawing from various studies, Renard (2003) shows that it is not enough to verify the characteristics of products – their quality, for instance – and trust the guarantee labels. There is a strategic dimension of ‘inventing’ and selling traditions, especially in the case of organic and so-called fair trade food products. If ecolabels accumulate symbolic capital, there is also certain reflexivity to them: instead of merely relating seals to products, labels may also come to relate to other labels – and disputes come to the fore. One of the problems that could be highlighted is that the quality (or any other attribute) identified by a seal is the outcome of a power correlation normally concealed from consumers. A ‘backstage’ exists where the system of certification and quality attributes is constructed, and where facts and processes imply the creation of criteria, the setting of standards, normatization and power differentials (Renard, 2005; Busch, 2000).

What Renard (2003, 2005) understands as a struggle between ecocertification and the strategic dimension of

markets, which itself poses issues concerning transparency, needs to be expanded to a global scale. This is the argument propounded by Mutersbaugh *et al.* (2005) for a supra-national constellation of bodied working towards the harmonization of certifications. These authors focus attention on an aspect unnoticed by many, especially those situated at the centers of world capitalism: ecolabels are instruments of command, functioning not only as a state barrier to ‘non-compliant’ products, but as tools of economic and symbolic power wielded by labeling agencies themselves.

The opposition between these first two interpretive approaches shown requires some further clarification. The authors associated with what we call the ‘politics of ecolabeling’ do not deny the claim that labeling is informative and may empower producers, as well as enhancing trust among consumers. What they emphasize, though, is that these are not just innocent mechanisms awaiting further refinements to improve their technical efficiency: rather, this process is itself permeated by power relations and domination strategies. At the same time, the certification mechanism *per se* is not continuously suspected of fraud. Though not a source of absolute belief, it may nonetheless be perceived as legitimate and reliable. Yet even while empowering producers – in some cases, those already with better socioeconomic conditions – it introduces regulations and impositions.

The power constellation and the demands for international trade relations to be standardized partly explain the emergence and growing importance of ecolabeling processes. Nonetheless, other sociological arguments can reveal other aspects. A vital area, in terms of understanding the use of seals, is the symbolic dimension, and the various processes of connection and disconnection that labels enable. Based on the work of Renting *et al.* (2003), two parallel connections can be highlighted: producer-consumer and local-global. The case of foodstuffs is particularly emblematic. As Starr (2010) shows, localness as a means of accessing fresh and healthy food can be a highly sensitive topic and mobilize new social movements. So-called regional specialties are products valued in the places where they are produced and consumed, which are simultaneously able to convert long distances into a short supply chain. This is made possible by the fact that consumer knowledge of the products and their embeddedness in the localities where they are produced create connections and shared meanings. In many cases, customers even accept paying a higher price for the food because of a particular characteristic that they know and value. Renting *et al.* (2003) show the role of labeling in this process. As physical distances increase, ecocertification has the power to *symbolically reduce them*. This analytic emphasis on the symbolic and associative nature of labeling allows us to move beyond the field of struggle for legitimacy – and the protection of attributes – to the problem of connections.

As well as promoting symbolic connections, Ilbery *et al.* (2005) observe that ecolabeling certifies a product’s origin and qualifies it (whether it is rare, high-quality and so on) according to its mode of production (handmade, for instance) or to the place of production (if social and natural conditions are a vital aspect of its manufacture or form of agricultural production). Labels signal the idea that ‘combined elements’ (a product and its site of origin or a product and its specific manufacturing process) enable ways of life, labor processes or the natural characteristics of territories to generate economic benefits when they come to be identified somehow with certain products (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000; Ilbery & Maye, 2007).

This third interpretive framework elicits a debate on the symbolic aspects of labels and certification. Localness and quality, authenticity and ways of life are brands that can only acquire meaning as part of a broader process of social, economic and symbolic valorization of distinction. Indeed some researchers have sought a particular value on which to hinge their analyses, such as the opposition between differentiated and non-differentiated goods. According to Bowen and Valenzuela Zapata (2009), guarantees in the form of “*value-based labels provide a challenge to the abstract capitalist relations that fuel exploitation in the global agro-food system.*” (Note 1) Hence the contemporary capitalist economy deploys increasingly powerful signs that also themselves become market products. The connection is not only between labels and the processes or practices established as relevant to products: links in a value chain are juxtaposed and combined without losing the relationality between the attributes. Here the notion of connection provides the analytical thread and these authors suggest that something is *acting alongside or beyond* the politics of certification.

Finally, it should be noted that a number of studies of ecolabels emphasize their multiple functions. This is the case of the work of Howard and Allen (2006), who enumerate three main functions, especially pertinent in the case of agriculture. Firstly, labels inform consumers about characteristics of the product that are not visible, apparent or possible to verify at the time of purchase (for instance, labor conditions, the use of toxic chemicals, and so on). Secondly, they can operate as mechanisms for implementing public policies. Thirdly, they may favor certain market niches, thereby enabling price premiums and boosting sales for producers who follow organic practices (Lockie, 2009; Hinrichs, 2000).

Hatanaka *et al.* (2005) are also interested in complementary functions. Their work stresses that ecolabeling processes in organic agriculture operate through three mechanisms: a principle of regulation and normalization of production; an instrument of verification predicated on food safety and human health; and an attribute of guarantee of food quality. (Note 2) The researchers provide a rigorous analysis and do not fail to point out that insofar as labels are essential to the functioning of markets (even when for reasons of health and safety), they are instruments of domination. The differentiation introduced by ecolabeling not only creates spaces for goods with different degrees of quality or symbolic attributes, it also disciplines people and things across the entire production chain, with implications for all of those participating in it. (Note 3)

2.2 Risk and the Primacy of Technique

When specific technical procedures from the fields of finance and accounting invade other spheres of social and economic life, auditing and controls become commonplace. The growth of compliance labels runs in parallel with the phenomenon that Power (1997) calls rituals of verification and that Strathern (2000) terms, in its anthropological version, audit cultures. Social behavior comes to be oriented by the continuous verification of processes and products, while the organization of conduct and modes of production based on compliance becomes routine.

Processes used to authenticate a particular quality, regardless of the technical knowledge involved, will always constitute a social mode of classification granting or acknowledging the unique properties of a specific product. This socially authorized act adds to the product's symbolic value. The following passage by Bourdieu (2001), for whom the value of branding lies in the rarity of the maker, is particularly telling: "*It is by producing the rarity of the producer that the symbolic field of production produces the rarity of the product*".

Along with notions of authenticity and the legitimacy of the authenticator, an increasing variety of labels, compliances, standardization procedures, inspections, criteria and traceability have become important to the economy and healthcare alike. This also reflects a society concerned with the origins of food and other products and goods: signs of a global politics marked by risk and uncertainty (Beck, 1992; Abélès, 2010). The specificity of technologies and the importance of implementing certification procedures highlights the fact that even systems of participatory guarantees and labels may be tied to the architecture of rituals of verification (Power, 1997). This point will be explored briefly below.

Abélès' argument bears close similarities to the well-known positions of Giddens (1990, 1998) and Beck (1992), who typically identify late modernity as a 'risk society'. The first author proposes that modernity is characterized by reflexivity and the dissolution of the relatively contained space of national societies, thus opening up new directions for an arrangement of global relations in which the feeling of security presiding over primary relations disappears. But this insistence on reflexivity routinizes risk: it appears as perception, reflection and a continuous and daily experience in people's lives. It is also worth considering analytic approaches informed by Foucault's work (especially 2007, 2008), which became popular in English-speaking countries after the volume organized by Burchell *et al.* (1991). In this epistemic space, safety and risk are analyzed according to notions of power technologies and truth representations, which turn conducts into values and norms unaware of their own historical construction.

Approaching the topic from an anthropological viewpoint, Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) proposed that "*risk should be seen as a joint product of knowledge about the future and consent about the most desired prospects*." The perception of risk is a social process, and all pose dilemmas for themselves about how to combine trust and fear: "*Risk taking and risk aversion, shared confidence and shared fears, are part of the dialogue on how best to organize social relations*" (ibid). According to Lash (2000), risk is an aggregating element that creates imaginary social menace. A general sense of vulnerability and insecurity now pervade late capitalism. Debates on risk society as a characteristic of contemporaneity indicate the emergence of this ethos, the development of an identity based on collective risk and the assemblage of communities through a notion of eventual and/or imminent danger. In anthropological approaches to these arguments, collective representations of risk are taken to have an integrative function of maintaining social solidarity, while the cultural meaning of risk may become part of a political strategy of social mobilization.

Having established risk, danger and threat as cognitive modes in our contemporary society, we can furthermore observe the reconfiguration and technologization of the ways in which risk is identified, perceived, assessed, communicated and managed – where technical forms of power and governance become institutionally legitimized. The search for security leads to what Giddens (1990) has called expert systems: that is, systems that suppose technical excellence or professional capacity for execution. If risk is eminent, it becomes necessary to *certify* that the elements to which we are exposed through the environment or our food intake are within the

bounds of acceptable risk. Its quantification is a technical matter. The dominant role of technique in our society evokes the classic critique of scientific rationality offered by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), who warned of the totalitarian threat posed by the growing technologization of society, potentially leading to the concentration of power in the hands of a technocratic elite. However, the loose way in which the notion of control has been applied to participatory guarantee systems for organic products reveals the permeability and capacity of a kind of legitimized (government) conduct. Groups of small farmers and their social mediators – state agencies or civil society organizations – internalize and partly naturalize procedures such as self-verification, self-discipline and internal management based on collective surveillance.

In a more optimistic vein, Beck (1995) suggests that the social consciousness of risk is developing into a new critical rationality, leading to the political transformation of industrial society. For him, we are living in a period when the costs to industrialization caused by environmental damage outdo its benefits, prompting the emergence of a new form of rationality that is ecologically responsible and sufficiently politically robust to guide us into an era of ‘ecological enlightenment’

In the case of ecological or organic agriculture, one consequence of this profound social transformation has been the spread of independent certification systems. There seems to be no doubt that ecolabels manifest the power of international agencies and multilateral organisms (as well as that of certain states with political and economic muscle in this area) to impose safeguarding and risk mitigation mechanisms *vis-à-vis* the quality of products. Nonetheless, the priority given to technology authorizes a model of certification that inevitably depends on a third-party format, triangulating an originally dyadic relationship between producer and consumer through the inclusion of a third social actor: the expert, someone with accumulated technical capital. This actor may work for a state entity or for institutions accredited by the Government for this purpose. In participatory systems, this position may be occupied by people with prestige and local leadership capacity; thereby opening up space for more personalized, but no less politicized, relationships.

3. Ecolabeling of Organic Produce in Brazil

After the Community of European States (today European Union) and the United States enacted legislation and norms for the production, trade and circulation of organic produce in 1990 and 1991; negotiations became more conflict-ridden in 1994 with the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). In 1999, the Department of Socioeconomic and Rural Studies (*Departamento de Estudos Sócio-Econômicos Rurais*: DESER), linked to family farming movements in the Brazilian South, published a document summarizing the events:

In August 1994, the main institutions working with organic agriculture in Brazil received a communication from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply informing them that Brazil was under pressure, especially from the Community of European States, to establish national norms for the entire process of producing and commercializing organic products in the country. These pressures were an outcome of the GATT round, which resulted in the creation of the WTO [...]. In Brazil, ecolabeling emerged informally through the work of NGOs [...] that set their own internal norms [...] Soon after, the need emerged for certifying products for internationally recognized institutions, aimed at exports (DESER, 1999, cited in Kilian 2003).

This paragraph synthesizes the issue at stake since the mid-nineties, precisely when the WTO was formalized and around three years after organic certification laws were introduced in Europe and the United States. Brazil was obliged to adapt to the changes towards harmonized and standardized systems for producing, processing and commercializing organic products due to *pressures*.

But were these pressures external only? Not entirely. Some key laws during this recent period of Brazilian history set out provisions on the issue, though some were later revoked or altered. More recently, three official documents laid the foundations for organic production and for ecolabeling and guarantee systems: Law 10, 831 of 2003; Decree 6,323 of 2007; and Normative Instruction 64 of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply, issued in 2008.

Law 10,831 of December 23rd 2003, regulated by Decree 6,323 of December 27th 2007, establishes what kind of production should be considered organic. It also includes sections emphasizing both the importance of international laws and agreements, and their appropriation by Brazil – a process in which social movements, NGOs and academics have all participated. Probably following debates with environmental movements and local groups, the Brazilian legislation incorporated an *addendum* on cultural diversity: in one of its early paragraphs, the law mentions the cultural integrity of rural communities as a constitutive element of ecological systems (Brazil, 2003).

However, it is Decree 6,323 of 2007 that has the broadest scope (Brazil, 2007). It defines the general attributes of organic production (further detailed in the 2008 Normative Instruction, Brazil, 2008) and the role of ecolabeling in particular. This is a crucial point: in Brazil's case, a set of provisions and resolutions exists that are highly transparent and specific to participatory guarantees and third-party ecolabeling – in other words, the Brazilian law opens up space for both, while establishing a clear difference between them.

The operational procedures for the two systems are as follows: the Brazilian government's system of accreditation for third-party ecolabeling (in the document Conformity Assessment Bodies [*Organismos de Avaliação de Conformidade: OACs*]) is run by INMETRO (the National Institute of Metrology, Standardization and Industrial Quality) with registration provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply. For Participatory Conformity Assessment Bodies (*Organismos Participativos de Avaliação de Conformidade: OPACs*), there is no need for accreditation by INMETRO, just registration with the Ministry. These OPACs are, however, monitored by State Organic Production Committees (*Comissões Estaduais da Produção Orgânica: CPORGs*).

Another regulatory item revealing the national appropriation of global events – one which was subject to collective debate before its enactment – is the possibility for organic farmers to sell their produce directly *without* labels. This provision is reserved for producers organized in cooperatives, groups and associations. The difference is significant since while not denying the importance of ecolabeling, it allows for an alternative legitimization process. The local collective, whatever its organizational format, is granted the role of informally 'certifying' the products, and enables produce to be qualified as organic only when sold directly to consumers, dispensing with the use of labels in this case. (Note 4)

In all events, Brazilian laws and decrees strive to be on a par with many of the provisions found in international laws and regulations and follow global procedures relating to production, transportation, packaging, labeling and storage. This is concretized in those sections of the decree that set guidelines for third-party ecolabeling, which are expected to comply with verification mechanisms found in the European Union, the United States, Japan, Australia and elsewhere. At the same, though, the Brazilian legislation extends its scope to aspects considered particularly relevant to the situation of Brazilian farmers. Two key issues, in this respect, are safeguarding for local varieties (i.e. seeds not protected by intellectual property law and conserved *in situ*) and preventing genetic erosion (i.e. narrowing of biological diversity). All these processes are subject to legislative procedures and here it should be observed that the *force of law* (Agamben, 2005) is a fundamental condition: it authorizes something that emerged as a concern in civil society, but that only the state has the power to act upon as the decision-making and enacting agency.

Brazil's legislative framework also requires ecolabeling for imports. It demands certification by an accredited body or demands that the product comes from a country which has an agreement of equivalence or mutual recognition of assessment systems with Brazil. It should be observed that international harmonization not only challenges the principle of autonomy (constructed locally or by social networks) so heavily emphasized by the groups involved in participatory ecolabeling. In a study with independent bodies in the United States, Hatanaka and Busch (2008) show that disagreements exist over how the interaction between general and local norms in third-party certification should unfold. One of the points of dispute is that these institutes have to be accredited by international bodies. This entails the need for standardization and the cost of accreditation is significant.

The Brazilian decree of 2007 instituted the Brazilian System of Organic Conformity Assessment, which includes both participatory and third-party formats (Brazil, 2007). Particularly in the case of participatory guarantees, the decree establishes how to constitute and organize what it calls Participatory Guarantee Systems of Organic Quality – commonly called SPGs (*Sistemas Participativos de Garantias*) in Brazil. SPGs need to be monitored and standardized and this implies introducing a series of changes to the existing systems.

In the present study, it is described the participatory assessment system as participatory ecolabeling. It should be noted, however, that this terminology is deployed by those directly involved in these processes – i.e. farmers, mediators, rural union leaders, politicians, agronomists and veterinarians. In fact, this usage is so widely accepted that there is no question as to whether the participatory system is a form of ecolabeling or not. Nevertheless, Decree 6,323 does indeed differentiate between ecolabeling and participatory guarantee systems (SPGs). The distinction is subtle and many of the 'field intellectuals' have yet to pay sufficient attention to the potentially neutralizing effect of this legislation. (Note 5)

At this point, it should be clear that the establishment of a system of organic guarantees and ecolabeling in Brazil follows less the rise of labels as tools for optimizing market relations than what we have called a *politics of certification*. This is not to deny that these processes have a connective meaning. The very politicization of the

production/consumption of foodstuffs, in which state rationality (present also in the internationalized landscape of norms) in the form of laws, risk controls and insecurity finds its ultimate form, signals an intention to break away from the anonymity of markets and the divides established by modernist narratives (i.e. society/nature, local/global).

During the events that led to the above decrees, normative instructions and laws, the top-down control of public policies in this sector was strengthened. As a result, the OPACs are required to maintain records of traceability and full documentation, re-register farmers according to new rules dictated by the state, provide a specific scope of action, receive regular visits by members of the State Organic Production Committee and allow inspection by the Ministry of Agriculture when required. Hence, while Participatory Guarantee Systems had their own rules when they first began operating in different Brazilian regions (with some degree of harmonization between them), now the state issues resolutions that must become a basic standard for everyone. Controls of farmer registration are frequent and it has become increasingly commonplace for OPACS to have to re-register organic producers associated with participatory systems.

The state is compelled to search for ways to standardize and normalize what was already a form of network guarantee. These were initiatives developed by different civil society groups that typically had their own configuration, reflecting the sociocultural aspects specific to each of them. In addition to complying with the criteria listed earlier, participatory systems already using labels had to add the organic conformity label issued by the Ministry of Agriculture – in other words, yet another label certifying the organic quality of the product.

It is important to add that the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), which has gradually concentrated on promoting third-party certification as part of food safety and technical competence, has also included participatory, guarantee-based ecolabeling (IFOAM, 2007a and b) within its structure. It could be suggested that IFOAM began to support SPGs since it saw them as a way of maintaining control over organic production and providing roles that are valid (and accepted) at global level. The federation's documents concerning participatory guarantee systems emphasize that it is the small farmer who gains most from this form of ecolabeling. IFOAM encourages participatory systems for smaller scale trade, thus promoting ecological agriculture and local forms of control – albeit under the auspices of the federation. It remains true, however, that by insisting on 'small agriculture,' IFOAM also ends up restricting the guarantee system by demanding its association with a peasant or small family farmer lifestyle.

4. Conclusions

The interpretations, controversies and impasses concerning forms of ecolabeling expose political struggles and disputes for economic resources. When tariffs no longer form part of the core 'game' in international relations, other barriers are erected and the power of countries or economic blocs at the highest instance of trade regulation and negotiations in the world today, the WTO, becomes transparent. In this complex scenario, ecolabeling emerges to fill in gaps and occupy spaces: labels become tools for discernment, trust, authenticity and attesting to quality, but also instruments of power, discipline and harmonization.

Reflecting the fact that we live in a society defined by risk and uncertainty, ecolabeling has also grown in importance due to the lack of trust and the widespread panic about global catastrophes, pandemics and contaminations. In this context, any kind of certification and expert knowledge would seem to foster more trust and less risk. From this point of view social changes seem to confirm that we are heading towards greater reflexivity among individuals, as Giddens (1990) understands the term. But we can also witness the emergence of efforts to strengthen local production and consumption, a defense of traditional and artisanal labor and the creation of short supply chains based on trust, empathy and solidarity among social actors. These manifest other phenomena that cannot be solely explained by the reflexivity of social actors. In the case of economic phenomena especially, affective and symbolic elements need to be included in social science analyses.

A key issue today is the extent to which participatory labeling reproduces the independent certification that became increasingly important with the opening up of global markets. Between the appropriation and imitation of ecolabeling at a regional scale, the question is to consider the argument made by Escobar (1995) that power regimes have the express effect of reproducing their external logic at local level, while allowing space for the re-evaluation of given categories, resistances and two-way cultural transformations. This entails considering the phenomenon at multiple scales, along with the processes of 'refraction' (Viveiros de Castro, 2012) through which a category is (or various categories are) traversed by thick layers of local cultural codes. In this process, transformation occurs not only by turning the differentiated event into a given structure, but also by forcing us to think through the (new) categories that emerge (Sahlins, 1985; Viveiros de Castro, 2012). Do participatory guarantee systems have the power to change our understanding of ecolabeling?

Since independent ecocertification is assumed to be sustained by more objective methods and inspectors with their technical rationality are assumed to have no direct interest in what they assess, it might be concluded that this system would be safer and ensure fewer risks in terms of inauthentic organic produce or the use of banned inputs. However, the specialized literature on this topic does not appear to back this assertion unwaveringly. While a reasonable proportion of researchers argue that labeling can indeed be an effective market mechanism, insofar as these tools provide consumers with 'true' information about a product, others assert labels are inevitably immersed in a politics of distinction (Boström & Klintman, 2008; Goodman & Goodman, 2007). It remains for us to ponder the legitimacy of multiple technical rationalities (different kinds of knowledge) and their social and political spaces.

However, while some risks can be assessed and neutralized, others emerge, reflecting the fact that every culture selects which risks to take and which to avoid (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). The use of ecolabels in organic farming suggests that they act as pivots for maintaining controls and exemptions from environmental risks. In fact, studies have shown that labels generate special markets and promote commercial chains for food products with eco-social content. It should be noted, however, that the mere attribution of organic conformity labels may have a limited capacity to tackle adjacent problems, such as the conservation of agrobiodiversity. If participatory ecolabeling – depending on the case and context – is taken to promote associations, social interaction and resistance to forms of delegating inspection, then it will become the subject of yet more dilemmas and risks associated with organic quality and power disputes at the local level.

In Brazil, studies of the implementation of laws and rules for organic agriculture and forms of certification have shown that state concerns are linked both to what happens globally – the need to adapt to measures agreed upon internationally – and to domestic power relations. This provides for regulatory formats better adjusted to the Brazilian context.

By posing anew the question of the cultural meaning of risk as a political strategy of social mobilization, forms of participatory guarantee have cast doubt on the broadly accepted and legitimized method of third-party verification. Social movements, non-governmental organizations and state laws are shaking up the rigid structure of global norms and standards based on certification by independent bodies. As an alternative, they propose more democratic formats where the issuing of labels does not become an acritical absolutism, as though merely attaching labels to goods could solve problems of fraud and quality. Still, the question remains whether the adherence to participatory and accountable methods does not itself actualize schemes of control and power through new disciplines (such as the internalization of self-discipline) and the monitoring of performance.

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Notes

Note 1. For arguments towards a value-based theory of labels, see Barham (2002); on the question of authenticity and the power of certification, see Pratt (2007).

Note 2. Fonseca (2005) suggests that although organic food labels have various functions, it should be kept in mind that they are the outcome of norms produced by privileged actors. On environmental labels and the social construction of markets for certified Brazilian timber, see Carneiro (2007).

Note 3. Hatanaka and Busch (2008) underline that ecolabeling operates as a mechanism of governance through which the public and the private organize criteria for inspection and regulatory compliance. These authors also argue, however, that certifying bodies lack operational independence – that is, objectives, agendas, and benefits of their own. Differently from Boström and Klintman (2007), therefore, who see science as the site for (the struggle for) legitimacy in ecolabeling, certainly referring here to the entities that issue third-party labels, Hatanaka and Busch (2008) suggest that it is independence that generates trust.

Note 4. Organic farmers who sell directly to markets are allowed to use the following denomination: “organic product for direct sale by organized family farmers, not subjected to ecolabeling according to Law 10,831 of February 23rd 2003” (Brazil, 2009). These farmers agree to allow consumers and governmental inspection bodies to visit their rural properties and require official documentation demonstrating the use of ecologic production techniques.

Note 5. In a document published in 2009, illustrated by Ziraldo (a famous Brazilian cartoonist), the Ministry of Agriculture seeks to disseminate the objectives contained in the laws, decrees and normative instructions on ecolabeling and organic food. In this work, the message revolves around two similar processes, apparently distinguished by legislation: participatory guarantee and ecolabeling (Brazil, 2009). These popularization tools deployed by the state may entice identification among consumers and help spread the word on the benefits of organic foods, while simultaneously disciplining them (Brazil, 2009).

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