

BOOK REVIEW

Versão traduzida | DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0034-759020220109x>

ALTERNATIVE AGRI-FOOD ORGANIZATIONS

Sociologie des systèmes alimentaires alternatifs. Une promesse de différence

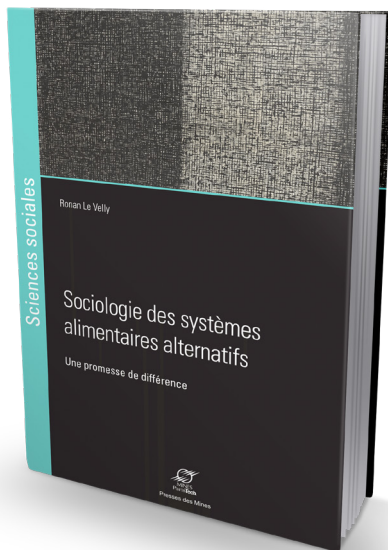
Ronan Le Velly. Paris, France: Presses des Mines, Collection Sciences Sociales, 2017. 200 p.

This book formed part of the postdoctoral studies I carried out in 2019 to 2020 under the supervision of Prof. Dr. John Wilkinson, in the Graduate Program in Social Sciences in Development, Agriculture, and Society at the Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, with the aim of discussing the practices of organizations that operate in the agri-food system, specifically in so-called alternative markets. The main issue of the book is addressed throughout this review, through an interdisciplinary dialogue with the field of Organizational Studies. Production and new ways of feeding have been subject to sharp criticism because of the disastrous results of contemporary food diets that are based on carbohydrates, animal protein, and sugars. The effects are mainly the result of the mass production of goods symbolized by the *4F* Crops model (Food, Feed, Fiber, and Fuel) (Niederle & Wesz, 2018), whose main players are multinational conglomerates that dominate commodity contract negotiations and futures exchange on the Chicago Board of Trade. In this complex and dynamic contemporary scenario, which affects organizations, societies, and individuals, what potential contributions can the Organization Studies field make to this debate in dialogue with other fields of knowledge?

Controversies surrounding food in modern societies, and its different modes of production and consumption have advanced beyond the established debate on agricultural production techniques, the Green Revolution, the effects of the intensive use of new technologies, and chemical inputs in food production.

In a book that was recently published in France on alternative food systems, Ronan Le Velly states that despite the diversity that exists between organizations in agri-food systems, it is possible to distinguish the agri-food system *mainstream* from organizations that share what the author calls a “promise of difference”. These organizations adopt their own particular ways of production that are spread by commercial and consumption practices known as alternatives. In other words, they are linked to an alternative “design” notion, with characteristics that are unique to them, resulting in the promise of other organizational forms of agri-food systems, which generate benefits for individuals, societies, and the planet.

Empirical research into food, consumption, agri-food systems, and their markets has been receiving outstanding interdisciplinary contributions, in which the field of Organization Studies has participated in an incipient but promising way. Highlighting, in Brazil, Vol. 58, no. 3, May-June 2018, of the *RAE*, a special issue dedicated to addressing the subject. Specifically in relation to this field’s dialogue with economic sociology, the sociology of organizations, and pragmatism. Brazilian and international



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researchers in Organization Studies are investigating various phenomena, with an emphasis on research into innovation processes (organizational and marketing innovation), organizational change processes, or even the structuring of collective action, which occurs within organizations or emerges from markets.

How to explain, for example, that consumers agree to pay more for organic products or engage in voluntary work, when driven by the values and principles that these organizations encourage? Take, for example, the emblematic cases of the international *Slow Food* movement or the global fair-trade organization, *Fair Trade International*. What makes their members mobilize and engage in collective actions in defense of food, for example, that is “good, clean, and fair” (*Slow Food*, 2007)? How are the forms of regulating actions between actors who are so heterogeneous, who mobilize for a common goal, constituted? What is the point of talking about alternative agri-food systems or organizations when the boundaries of conventional, alternative systems are so vague? Is the alternative in these cases an attribute of social distinction for generating economic value for business organizations, or should it be understood from other points of view and with other characteristics?

The author identifies two main axes that structure these organizations’ actions: Control regulation activities and autonomous regulation activities. These regulatory activities are those that ultimately characterize and differentiate them, as does the design notion that encourages the actions of their actors.

Beginning with the sociology of organized action (Reynaud, 1988, 1997, 2003) in a dialogue with the classical tradition of Organizational Theory, control regulation activities, which are typical of bureaucratic organizations (Crozier, 1963), are carried out by hierarchically superior groups in the organizational structure, which are responsible for activities that regulate and control work, or that establish standards and processes that regulate the organization’s activities, such as purchasing goods processes, work delegation activities, and the detailed written rules that go to make up commercially recognized quality standards, etc. Autonomous regulatory activities, on the other hand, refer to the activities carried out by actors that are controlled and prescribed, and that seek to replace dominant practices with new organizational arrangements.

The plurality of regulatory sources makes the determination of the *locus* of control or the autonomy of collective actions diffuse, since they are not restricted to the organization’s domains, its organizational structure, or even to a single dominant group or actor; they spread by way of social and economic relationship

networks inside or outside the organization. In this sense, regulatory activities focus on issues of cooperation and coordination between actors.

Regulatory activities help structure collective action, which is made up of hybrid collectives: actors, relationships, actions, rules, artifacts, routines, discourses, etc. These activities are provisionally stabilized by the organizations’ social relations, their agreements and decisions, and by current and accepted organizational practices. The link between actors and collective action that comes from regulatory activities results in the formation of organizational collectives, such as a company, cooperative, or social movement.

These notions are present in the actor-network theory of Akrich, Callon, and Latour (1988), in the sociology of market agencements by Michel Callon (1998, 2013), and in market mediation concepts (Latour, 2006). All these approaches have been increasingly used in Organization Studies in different topics that are not restricted to the agri-food system.

From this point on, Le Velly highlights the fact that that indeterminant spaces of collective action result in zones of uncertainty, enabling new spaces to open up for negotiating established rules. These spaces represent the actors’ margins of maneuver (Crozier, 1963; Crozier & Friedberg, 1977), as “norms are always incomplete and ambiguous, being subject to interpretation” (Velly, 2017, p. 29). The strategic capacity of actors for “discovering and experimenting new resources and ways of playing the game” (Friedberg, 1993, p. 178) signals, from a market point of view, the opportunity for innovation in the search for greater control and increased power over market regulations, whether by introducing new products, new practices, and organizational processes, or by creating new market niches. These strategic innovations, and the implementation of mechanisms such as “brand, packaging, or consumer credit” (Velly, 2017, p. 29) are concrete examples that result from the conflict process between groups, underlying the market’s regulatory activities.

The book provides us with pathways for answering some of the questions raised in this review by proposing a very original theoretical framework that directly dialogues with Organizational Theory to empirically guide the French case studies that the author has been investigating since the early 2000s.

Three case studies are presented on local food supply chains, which highlight the alternative generation processes with a focus on the hybridization processes of these systems. The regulatory activities required for supplying organic food are identified. These comprise the restrictions and conditions imposed by the legal framework of purchases, or by the dominant practices of

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companies that mainly operate in long-distance trade. In both situations, spaces and opportunities open up for commercial innovation and reconfiguring the studied phenomenon.

The last two chapters discuss the effects produced by growth on the commercial scale of two outstanding initiatives. The case presented reconstructs the *Fairtrade* conventionalization process initiative, a phenomenon the author calls “fair-trade *mainstreaming*”, by way of *Max Havelaar* organizations in France and Holland, and *Fairtrade International*. Le Velly does not restrict himself to understanding them only through the

theoretical framework of the economics of convention (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991), or global value chains (Gereffi & Sturgeon, 2005), but above all by mobilizing recent contributions from the new economic sociology in dialogue with Organizational Theory.

In summary, the book provides Brazilian graduate students and researchers who are interested in the subject of organizational and agri-food systems with important and unprecedented contributions. It also promotes a fruitful dialogue with Organization Studies by bringing this field of knowledge closer to economic sociology.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Renê Birochi worked on the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, theoretical review, writing and final revision of the manuscript.