

Corporate cooptation of organic and fair trade standards

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Abstract Recent years have seen a substantial increase in alternative agrifood initiatives that attempt to use the market to curtail the negative social and environmental effects of production and trade in a globalized food system. These alternatives pose a challenge to capital accumulation and the externalization of environmental costs by large agribusiness, trading and retail firms. Yet the success of these alternatives also makes them an inviting target for corporate participation. This article examines these dynamics through a case study of the two most significant such food system alternatives—organics and fair trade—focusing on corporate involvement in establishing and renegotiating the standards undergirding these initiatives. We compare the development of and contestation over the standards for both certified organic and certified fair trade, with particular attention to the U.S. context. We provide a brief history of their parallel processes of rapid growth and market mainstreaming. We examine claims of cooptation by movement participants, as well as the divergences and similarities between the organic and fair trade cases. Analyzing these two cases provides useful insights into the strategic approaches that corporate firms have deployed to further capital accumulation and to defuse threats to their profit margins and to status quo production, pricing, labor, trading and retailing practices. It can also offer valuable lessons regarding the most effective means of responding to such counter-reforms and of

protecting or reasserting the more transformative elements at the heart of these alternative systems.

Keywords Certification · Cooptation · Corporations · Fair trade · Organic · Social justice · Social movements · Standards

Abbreviations

ATO	Alternative trade organization
FLO	Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International
LI	Licensing initiatives
NGO	Non governmental organization
NI	National initiatives
NOSB	National Organic Standards Board
OCA	Organic Consumers Association
OFPA	Organic Foods Production Act of 1990
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

Introduction

Within the space of a few weeks in late 2005, two seemingly unrelated events occurred on opposite sides of the Atlantic that together symbolized a dramatic shift in the nature of alternative food systems. In late October, the Fairtrade Foundation in the United Kingdom granted the use of the fair trade seal to Nestlé, the world's largest food conglomerate and top coffee trader, for one small line of coffee on British grocery shelves (Tucker 2006, p. 7). In early November, the U.S. Congress voted to approve the "Organic Trade Association Rider," a legislative clause heavily lobbied for by agribusiness interests, which overturned a federal court ruling and significantly weakened the 4-year old USDA Organic standards (DuPuis and Gillon

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2009). Despite major differences between the two decisions, both were indicative of the same dual phenomena: the increasing participation of corporate agrifood players in the profitable organic and fair trade “game,” and their efforts to rewrite the rules of that game in ways that favor them. Both moves were highly controversial, unleashing vocal criticism from many consumers and activists that their respective standards had been “sold out” to corporate interests whose real intent was to render them toothless.

How does capital respond to social movements that attempt to use the market to curtail the negative social and environmental effects of production and trading in an increasingly globalized agrifood system? Many observers have analyzed the nature of the challenge posed by a multiplicity of “alternative” initiatives, originating in social movement activism, to the socially and ecologically destructive conventional capitalist relations that dominate the global food system. These alternative markets at least theoretically pose a challenge to companies’ externalization of environmental costs and the exploitation of small farmers and waged laborers, thus constraining their commercial practices and potentially reducing their profits. As such, argue some observers, they represent a form of social regulation, a partial Polanyian “re-embedding” of markets in systems of social and moral relations (Raynolds 2000; Mutersbaugh 2005; Jaffee 2007). Ironically, their success also makes them an inviting target for corporate participation, due to their creation of new spaces suitable for capital accumulation. The new corporate entrants have in many cases sought to weaken the threats posed by such alternatives, while simultaneously exploiting their potential for profits.

There has been a great deal of attention in the rural sociological and agrifood systems literature to the increasing corporatization of these new market sectors, particularly organics (e.g., Allen and Kovach 2000; Guthman 2004a), and more generally to questions of market mainstreaming strategies and their attendant risks and benefits. Several observers have focused on the ways that corporate agribusiness, distribution and retailing firms have responded to the challenge posed by the standards and third-party certification undergirding organic and fair trade ecolabels (e.g., Mutersbaugh 2005; Goodman and Goodman 2007; Jaffee 2007; Raynolds and Wilkinson 2007; Renard and Perezgrovas 2007; DuPuis and Gillon 2009). These strategies can be viewed as one part of what Fridell et al. (2008, p. 23) term a “corporate countermovement” against the regulatory impact of such agrifood schemes. Yet there has been little systematic examination of how large commercial interests have influenced the shaping of the *standards* and *rules* undergirding the agrifood alternatives, and no exploration of the parallel manner in which this phenomenon has unfolded across multiple sectors.

In this paper, we first discuss the motive of accumulation that drives efforts to co-opt agrifood alternatives. Next we describe the phenomenon of cooptation, focusing upon regulatory capture and the weakening of standards. We then examine organics and fair trade, which are among the most successful market-based agrifood alternatives, and provide a brief history of the parallel processes of rapid growth and market mainstreaming in these two movements, with particular attention to the U.S. context. These histories are followed by an analysis of instances of alleged cooptation. We suggest that analyzing the differences and parallels between the fair trade and organic cases provides useful insights into the strategic approaches that corporate capital has deployed to defuse threats both to its profit margins and to its dominant production, pricing, labor, trading and retailing practices. It can also offer valuable lessons regarding the most effective means of creating barriers to the accumulation of capital, in order to resist such counter-reforms and reassert the more transformative elements at the heart of these alternative systems.

The motive of accumulation

The “drive to amass capital” (Heilbroner 1985, p. 33) is the uncomplicated motivation of nearly all corporate activity. Alternative markets are developed by social movements in order to reclaim ethical values that are being eroded by status quo means of accumulation (Habermas 1985). In their efforts to create a viable market-based alternative, however, these markets may foster economic growth and create new spaces for extracting profits. The original non-economic motivations may lead to a tendency to overestimate the threat these market-based efforts pose to the dominant market logic. In other words, they may pose a threat to status quo means of accumulation, but not necessarily to the process of accumulation itself.

Capitalist responses to alternatives need not be organized, and interest in the markets painstakingly developed by social movements can develop very rapidly among some firms, even while others continue to marginalize or even oppose them. Yet even small successes can stimulate corporate interest in market-based alternatives as a strategy for accumulation. This interest leads to the modification of some existing commercial practices, or at the very least of corporate discourse, in order to participate. The speed at which this occurs may be surprising to those involved in creating agrifood alternatives. In organics, for example, corporate participation increased dramatically in the mid-1990s as the organic sector approached 1% of total U.S. food sales, and just as progress toward a uniform federal standard was being made (Buck et al. 1997; Obach 2007). Appropriation of the discourse of “local” food occurred

even faster (Wal-Mart 2006; Novak 2008). However, the essential motivation for this participation remains the goal of profit rather than a commitment to the ideals that originally shaped the development of agrifood alternatives.

Regulatory capture and the weakening of standards

How should one understand the choices made by the large commercial players who in many cases have opted to “join the game” in alternative agrifood markets—taking advantage of the profits offered by these niches and the integrity they represent to consumers—while at the same time attempting to neutralize the transformative power of the standards underpinning that integrity? Here we turn to conceptual frameworks from other arenas, including social movement literature focused on cooptation, and the public choice literature on the economics of regulation that examines regulatory capture.

Cooptation

The concept of cooptation has been developed most extensively in the sociological literature on U.S. social movements, beginning with Selznick’s study of the Tennessee Valley Authority (1949), in which he describes cooptation as “the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence,” in either formal or informal ways. The term has since been used to describe the efforts of states or government entities to neutralize the effectiveness of movements for social change. Gamson (1968, 1975) was instrumental in defining cooptation as an outcome in which a minority or movement group becomes institutionalized or is incorporated into the state, but without winning any substantive policy gains. More recently, cooptation has been used to describe the efforts of powerful political and economic actors, such as corporations, to maintain the status quo (Campbell 2001). While cooptation is a broad concept, we focus here on two specific means of achieving this goal: regulatory capture and attempts to weaken standards.

Regulatory capture

The concept of regulatory capture describes a situation in which parties with a strong interest in the outcome of regulatory decisions attempt to influence the bodies making such decisions, and in which those entities—entrusted with protecting the public interest—instead come to serve the commercial or special interests they are charged with regulating. Dal Bó (2006, p. 203) defines regulatory capture broadly as “the process through which special interests

affect state intervention in any of its forms.” The concept originally emerged from public-choice economic theory. Stigler (1971) focused on the behavior of government agencies charged with regulation of monopolies, challenging the prevailing “public interest” view that regulators will mainly be motivated by a sense of duty to protect consumers from the abuses of monopoly power. In fact, regulatory experts often come to sympathize or directly identify with (and may indeed have come directly from) the industries they regulate. If the regulatory entity is staffed with people historically responsive to interests hostile to the market sector it is charged with supervising (e.g., the USDA in the case of organics), the probability of capture is even greater. Later work in this area has placed more attention on the role played by other interest groups (e.g., activists, consumers, environmentalists) in influencing regulatory agendas, on the organizational processes occurring within agencies themselves, and on the role of legislative bodies vis-à-vis regulators (Laffont and Tirole 1991).

Weakening standards

One result of regulatory capture is increased power on the part of industry to weaken or dilute standards in ways that facilitate capital accumulation and deflect challenges to the status quo. Many observers of corporate involvement in organics and fair trade refer in some way to the “watering-down” of the integrity of standards, including (in organics) at the level of individual U.S. states and certifiers prior to passage of the federal organic law in 1990 (e.g., Renard 2005, p. 420; Fridell et al. 2008, p. 30; DuPuis and Gillon 2009). One key effect of weakening standards is that it may lower the bar to entry, thus allowing the certification of actors and practices that would have previously been non-conforming, and bringing these alternatives closer to the status quo.

Corporate actors can employ a range of strategies to weaken standards and facilitate accumulation. Firms can work to: (1) remove rules that are not commensurate with industrial agricultural practices, large-scale distribution, concentrated ownership, or global sourcing that seeks the lowest labor and material costs; (2) change rules so that they can be met effectively only by participants with access to large-scale capital (thus creating a barrier to small-scale capital), such as extremely rigorous safety or sanitary standards requiring expensive equipment; (3) erode price premiums so that only firms with economies of scale can stay in business; or (4) solicit the assistance of the state (in the form of subsidies, research, or infrastructure) in ways that privilege the largest firms. Perhaps the most effective such strategy is (5) to alter the content of standards to simplify a multi-faceted or holistic alternative toward a single issue. The preeminent example of this approach is

the promulgation of USDA organic standards that render the effective meaning of *organic* as the substitution of inputs, to the exclusion of a more holistic set of agroecological practices that had formerly challenged the industrial model of agriculture (Allen and Kovach 2000; Guthman 2004a; Mansfield 2004). While some movement advocates may view the incorporation of this sole issue (elimination of agrochemicals) into status quo accumulation strategies as a success, it is a shallow transformation that does little to challenge oligopolistic markets themselves. Even this single dimension is at risk as the meanings developed in the creation of a more ethical alternative are eventually colonized by the logic of accumulation (Habermas 1985).

We now proceed to examine in greater detail how the motive of accumulation and the processes of movement cooptation, regulatory capture, and weakening of standards have developed with respect to both the organic and fair trade sectors. Because these sectors encompass a broad range of participants with divergent and sometimes conflicting ideals, there is substantial contestation over what constitutes cooptation. The analysis in the following section focuses on claims of cooptation made by social movement-oriented actors within these initiatives, while recognizing that other, more market-oriented participants might disagree.

Standards cooptation in organics

Organic food has undergone a well-documented transformation from a tiny movement to an industry worth more than \$19 billion a year in the U.S. (Conner 2004; Fromartz 2006; Guthman 2004a; Pollan 2006; Anonymous 2008). Bob Scowcroft, the former executive director of California Certified Organic Farmers and current executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, described the motivations that led to its initial success:

Organic food emerged in the '70s as a product that reflected consumers' right to know how their food was grown and processed. Many different social, environmental, and farm-based objectives merged to promote organics as the only labeled alternative to an impersonal, chemically dependent, agro-industrial complex. (Scowcroft 2006, n.p.)

As markets expanded beyond direct sales, certifying agencies were established to verify the claims that were being made. By the late 1990s, more than 40 certifiers were operating at the state or regional level, although standards varied slightly (Hatamiya 1997; Fetter and Caswell 2002). Increasing sales led to subtle pressures for these standards to conform to the requirements of markets, such as allowing any scale of farm to be certified organic

(Guthman 2004a). As a result, some ideals were lost even before the national government became involved in regulating the organic sector.

In response to concerns about counterfeit organic products, some state governments began overseeing certification. In 1990, federal legislation—the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA)—was passed to create national organic standards with the rationale that it would eliminate the confusion of a patchwork of standards (OFPA 1990; Wolcott 2002). However, the OFPA was supported by powerful interests who stood to benefit from reducing the transaction costs of dealing with different certifying agencies when marketing nationally. The legislation authorized oversight by the USDA, an agency that traditionally has been hostile to alternative farming practices, including organic (Vos 2000). The first draft of the national standards was finally released in December 1997, and included provisions that would allow the “Big Three” agricultural practices in certified organic food: (1) irradiation, (2) sewage sludge and (3) genetically engineered organisms.

The organic movement helped mobilize an enormous public response to this proposal, with the USDA receiving 275,603 comments, the vast majority opposed to the inclusion of the Big Three in the definition of organic (Shulman 2003; Fromartz 2006). While the number of people commenting was unexpected, the comments themselves were not, because the proposal to include practices far from organic ideals was very effective in focusing attention on allowable inputs, to the exclusion of other goals (Goodman and Goodman 2007). Organic food processor Eden Foods, suggesting that this was a deliberate strategy, said, “we recognized the ‘Big Three’ as a common negotiating tactic: Make an offer that is so ridiculously unacceptable that all future offers would seem good by comparison” (Eden Foods 2006, n.p.). In October 2002, nearly 5 years after the first draft of the organic rule was released, a third draft went into effect as the final rule. It excluded the Big Three and was fairly strict with respect to prohibiting other unacceptable inputs (such as antibiotics and synthetic fertilizers and pesticides), but also removed references to the higher ideals of organic found in some regional certification systems. Importantly, the national standard creates a “ceiling” by prohibiting organic certifiers from enforcing stricter standards than those required by the USDA, even those they previously maintained. As a result, the activist group Organic Consumers Association (OCA) derisively refers to the USDA organic label as “Grade B Organic” (Cummins 2002).

Throughout this process of centralizing state authority over the meaning of organic, sales of certified organic foods in the U.S. increased dramatically, with an average 20% annual growth almost every year since 1990 (OTA 2007).

The availability of organics has also expanded to the point that nearly half of sales are now through mass market channels such as supermarkets and warehouse clubs (OTA 2006). Organic products can even be found in an increasing number of fast food restaurants and vending machines, and nearly three quarters of consumers surveyed report purchasing organic foods at least occasionally (Kavilanz 2008).

Among the consequences of this rapid sales growth and the accompanying development of national certification systems have been rapid industry consolidation and increasingly capitalist behavior in the off-farm segments of the organic food system (Ikerd 1999; Allen and Kovach 2000; DeLind 2000). The extent to which this has occurred is demonstrated by the fact that 14 of the 20 largest food processors in North America have either acquired organic brands or introduced organic versions of their existing brands (Howard 2009). There is also evidence that organic farms are increasing in scale and using more capital intensive inputs and production techniques, although the wide applicability of the “conventionalization thesis” to areas outside California is debated (Buck et al. 1997; Guthman 2004b; Lockie et al. 2006).

Table 1 lists significant events that have occurred in the organic industry and regulatory framework since the national standard was implemented, that movement-oriented participants have claimed are examples of cooptation (column C). These are classified in column A into the two categories discussed above: regulatory capture and weakening standards. Column B lists the broad domains in which these activities are occurring. For organic, these advocates assert that regulatory capture is occurring in two areas: (1) reduced democratic input, particularly with respect to the composition and authority of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), and (2) limited regulatory oversight on the part of the USDA. Efforts to weaken the standards are occurring in three areas: (1) the definition of animal access to pasture; (2) the definition of allowable inputs; and (3) extension to other products, such as cosmetics, pet food and fish. These efforts are occurring through both administrative action by the USDA and through Congressional legislation.

Standards cooptation in fair trade

The development of the international fair trade system is, on one hand, a success story of the use of standards and certification to “scale up” an alternative market, reaching increasing numbers of consumers through mainstream retail venues, and partially redressing the unjust terms of commodity trade by redistributing capital through guaranteed minimum prices. However, it can also be read as a different sort of tale: one of partial capture of the

alternative by large commercial participants who have engaged with it at only token levels, the weakening of standards by those market forces, the distancing of key governance bodies from the producers they ostensibly serve, and the dilution of the movement’s transformative power and its relational character.

At its inception, the fair trade movement was centered on a fundamental critique of the structural injustice of global trade. It was framed as an effort to redress the disadvantageous social and economic conditions faced by small commodity producers in the global South by linking them more directly with “conscious consumers” in the North, thus bypassing most conventional intermediaries. With its twin roots in development charities and radical solidarity NGOs in Europe and the U.S., the movement was initially characterized entirely by the Alternative Trade Organization (ATO) model, in which goods from producer cooperatives are sold through non-profit organizations or ethical for-profit businesses (Raynolds and Wilkinson 2007, p. 36).

The formation of the first fair trade certification—the Max Havelaar seal in the Netherlands in 1988—was the culmination of efforts to reach a substantial consumer base for the products of small farmer cooperatives, yet it also began the movement’s ongoing struggle with the practical and ethical dilemmas involved in market mainstreaming. Use of the seal was initially informal and was regulated by the civil society initiatives themselves. Eventually, these entities began to formalize certification criteria and practices, and in 1997 the 17 European fair trade national initiatives (or NIs) came together to form an international umbrella certifier, Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO),¹ which assumed the responsibilities for establishing uniform international fair trade standards, approving new products, and setting minimum prices. Formal certification did not arrive in the U.S. until 1999, with the creation of the national certifier Transfair USA. Almost immediately, the young movement began to encounter the tensions associated with growth. How was it to make fairly traded goods available to mass consumer audiences while still remaining true to the core values of the initiative, which emphasized creating direct, long-term trading relationships?

Fair trade has also undergone a marked process of institutionalization, as the national and international certification bodies became formalized and pressures for rigorous third-party certification and standards grew. As additional NIs were established in newer fair trade consumer countries, the social movement character was not always firmly implanted in their institutional “DNA.” In

¹ See the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International website at <http://www.fairtrade.net/>.

Table 1 Cooptation in organic

A: Process	B: Domain	C: Specific instances or claims
Regulatory capture	Reduced democratic input	Increasing industry representation on NOSB, even in designated ‘public/consumer’ and ‘environmentalist’ seats (Cummins and Eiding 2006). USDA bypassed NOSB authority for: (1) 1997 proposal to allow the “Big 3”—irradiation, genetic engineering, sewage sludge; (2) three guidances and a directive in 2004 to allow controversial inputs and extension to non-food products (Ness 2004).
	Limited regulatory oversight	Limited oversight of certifiers, such as no site visits in China until 2007 (Lavigne 2006). USDA deal to allow Aurora Dairy to correct 14 willful violations of pasture requirements without penalty in 2007 (McKinney 2007). No prosecutions of violators to date (Lavigne 2006).
Weakening standards	Definition of access to pasture	Increasing number of feedlot-scale dairies, such as those operated by Aurora and Horizon (Fantle 2008). USDA overturned Massachusetts certifier’s decision to revoke certification of Country Hen for inadequate outdoor access in 2002 (Fiser 2007).
	Definition of allowable inputs	Congressional rider to an appropriations bill to allow feeding conventional feed to ‘organic’ chickens passed in 2003 (though eventually overturned due to public pressure) (Food and Drink Weekly 2003). Organic Trade Association sponsored Congressional rider, which included allowing synthetic ingredients in processed organic foods, to an appropriations bill passed in 2005 (DuPuis and Gillon 2009). USDA allowance of non-organic ‘minor ingredients’ in processed foods in 2007 (Wilson 2007).
	Extension to other products	USDA directive stated intention of non-interference with organic claims for fish, pet food or body care products in 2004 (although settlement reached with Organic Consumers Association and Dr. Bronner’s to take more enforcement actions in 2005) (Myers 2008). Definition of organic fish—farmed and raised with non-organic feed—proposed in 2008 (Eilperin and Black 2008).

particular, Transfair USA, based in Oakland, California, has from its inception been marked predominantly by a business-oriented model, with civil society ties playing a negligible role in its governance structure. By the end of the 1990s, the NIs had largely standardized their functions and ceded a good measure of discretion and authority to FLO, based in Bonn, Germany.² FLO itself became more professionalized, and has been the site of contestation between competing interests in the growing fair trade market (Renard 2005, p. 425).

The corporatization of fair trade began, perhaps ironically, with an activist campaign targeting the multi-billion-dollar specialty coffee giant Starbucks, which had faced substantial criticism for its labor and pricing practices. A number of NGOs, led by San Francisco-based Global Exchange, insisted that Starbucks begin to purchase and offer fair trade certified coffee. In April 2000, just before the activists were set to launch simultaneous protests in 29 cities, the company relented and promised to sell fair trade

coffee in all of its U.S. stores. In the years since this development, a wide range of new commercial actors have entered the fair trade system. Other large specialty coffee roasters (e.g., Green Mountain Coffee Roasters) sought certification in order to compete with Starbucks. Some corporate mass-market roasters (e.g., Procter & Gamble and Nestlé) also have also followed suit, as have large restaurant chains (e.g. Dunkin Donuts and McDonalds) and retail chains with fair trade goods in store brands (e.g. Costco and Wal-Mart). This strategy has been effective at boosting consumer demand; annual growth of the global fair trade market has averaged over 40% (FLO 2007a). However, many fair trade participants argue that the growth imperative has facilitated cooptation, as the regulatory function of FLO and the NIs clashed with an economic interest in increasing demand. Paola Ghillani, a former FLO board member, alleged in reference to the 2005 UK certification deal with Nestlé that “the Fairtrade Foundation at that time, and maybe now, has got too much at stake. They were living from funding, but also from license fees [they received] each time they gave the label to a licensee. The inspection and certification system is not independent enough” (Bahra 2009).

² As of this writing there were 20 NIs recognized by FLO, with others in the process of applying for recognition. FLO recently began referring to these entities as Licensing Initiatives (LIs).

Table 2 Cooptation in fair trade

A: Process	B: Domain	C: Specific instances or claims
Regulatory capture	Reduced democratic input	Professionalization of FLO leads to ISO certification (2007), aligning fair trade with trend toward global harmonization of agrifood standards and away from small farmer concerns (Mutersbaugh 2005; Fair Trade Association of Australia and New Zealand 2007). Southern producer groups remain a clear minority on FLO board of directors and key committees, despite recent increase in representation (Renard and Perezgrovas 2007; FLO 2007b; FLO 2008a).
	Limited regulatory oversight	Licensing fee structure leads to lack of independence, creates disincentive to carefully regulate high-volume licensees (Bahra 2009).
Weakening standards	Lowered entry requirements	Fair Trade seal granted by Transfair USA to Starbucks in 2000 for only 1% of coffee purchases, altering agreement not to certify below 5% of total sales. Significant opposition from movement NGOs and smaller roasters (Rice 2005, personal communication; Bahra 2009). Nestle granted fair trade seal (UK) in 2005 by Fairtrade Foundation, over objections of many fair trade organizations. Nestlé's Partners Blend represents a fraction of 1% of Nestlé coffee purchases (Crowther 2005; Tucker 2006).
	Fair trade minimum prices	Falling real value of minimum prices; Coffee price not adjusted for inflation until minor 2007/2008 increase; has still lost 30–60% of original (1988) purchasing power. Farmgate fair trade prices remain below cost of production for many producers (Bacon and CLAC 2006; Jaffee 2007). Proposals within FLO to lower or eliminate minimum prices for coffee; social premium for tea lowered in 2008 (Bastian 2006; FLO 2008c).
	Certification of plantation agriculture	FLO dramatically increased certification of agribusiness plantations since 2003 for all but four products (coffee, cotton, cocoa and honey); many new products (e.g., cut flowers) introduced with exclusively and/or predominantly plantation production (Goigoi 2008). FLO wage-labor standards for plantations do not guarantee union representation (only right to unionize); fair trade social premiums are jointly administered by management and workers through controversial joint associations. Standards only require payment of national minimum wage, not living wages (FLO 2008b; Goigoi 2008; Bahra 2009). FLO and national initiatives court large transnational firms for licensing deals (e.g., Chiquita), and fail to protect small producers from unfair price competition from certified plantations (Tucker 2006).

Table 2 lists significant events that have occurred within the fair trade system that participants with movement orientations claim are examples of cooptation. As with Table 1, these fall into two broad categories—regulatory capture and standards weakening. With respect to regulatory capture, these processes are similar to those that have occurred in organic: reduced democratic input and limited regulatory oversight. Within the domain of weakening standards, however, the specific issues are different from those in the organic realm, and include lowered entry requirements, fair trade minimum prices and certification of plantation agriculture.

Comparative analysis

Before analyzing the lessons to be drawn from the processes that have played out in both organic and fair trade

standards, it is worth reviewing the areas where these two cases overlap, and where the differences are more pronounced.

The similarities between the standards-related changes in these two arenas, as we indicate above, are numerous. First, there has been an uneven penetration of capitalism within both sectors, with some branches of each retaining greater autonomy and/or integrity than others (e.g., the four non-plantation commodities in fair trade, and certain high value, difficult-to-mechanize crops within organics). Second, organics and fair trade share similar social movement origins, emerging out of different facets of the political and ecological critiques of the countercultural movements of the 1960s; both also depended for their initial growth on the consumer cooperative movement initiated during this period. Third, for both organics and fair trade, the market (rather than the state) is the primary target of the initiative: they seek to harness market forces to change the

ecologically and social destructive tendencies of the dominant or mainstream capitalist markets in agriculture—in the words of Barratt Brown (1993, p. 156), they work “in and against the market”—and both movements have experienced deep tensions between their foundational ideals and the constraints of that market system. Both initiatives have encountered enormous pressure to alter their standards to allow for an increased scale of production, augment sales, meet consumer demand, and fit better with the production patterns of conventional agribusiness. This has generated a clear conflict with the ideals of smallholder agriculture that guided the creation of both initiatives. Both movements have also experienced pressure to work with large publicly traded or transnational firms and large mainstream growers, causing a clash between the profit motives of those “disembedded” players and the core movement values that proclaim the value of social and environmental integrity over prices and the bottom line.

Fourth, in both cases there has been a movement subsidy to the market, as corporate actors reap profits from exploiting the niches that were painstakingly built by grassroots activist movements, appropriating or coopting both the discourse and the actual product seals generated by that activist labor (Barrientos et al. 2007). Fifth, the governance of both initiatives has undergone “institutional isomorphism” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Ransom 2007): the increasingly corporate-friendly stance of FLO, Transfair USA, and the NOSB has led not only to a shift in institutional culture, but also greater “professionalization,” in which these bodies increasingly come to resemble the companies they are charged with regulating. “While fair trade founders come from backgrounds in social activism and solidarity,” write Renard and Perezgrovas (2007, p. 147), “some current members of the national initiatives come from very different business-related backgrounds.” This is, of course, in addition to formal commercial representation on the NOSB and on the FLO board and committees. A sixth, fairly obvious parallel is that both movements have opted to base their value claims (and attendant price premiums) on third-party certified labels, undergirded by standards and funded by a system of certification fees, now paid by producers in both organics and fair trade. This has positioned both initiatives to be caught up in the steady movement toward harmonization of standards at the national and international levels. A final important similarity is the way standards have been transformed from a mechanism with which to force the internalization of ecological and social costs, into a device that places its imprimatur upon production and trading structures that continue the externalization of those costs (e.g., non-unionized laborers can now be used on large-scale monocrop plantations of both organic and fair trade products). Just as the practice of input substitution, for example,

has allowed large-scale monocrop organic production to become compatible with USDA Organic standards (see Allen and Kovach 2000, p. 224), so has the “triple whammy” of minimum price stagnation, the elimination of purchase-level benchmarks, and the advent of plantation certification permitted corporate agrifood conglomerates to engage in fair trade at token levels without fear of losing control over their sourcing and pricing practices. This bar lowering has clearly reduced the internalization of costs originally represented by both standards. What remains in each case is, increasingly, a single meaningful variable: the absence of synthetic agrochemicals in organic, and the provision of a (devalued) minimum purchase price in fair trade (Guthman 2004a; Bacon and CLAC 2006).

The differences between the fair trade and organic cases are equally instructive. First, there is the obvious distinction between the state locus of USDA organic standards and the non-state, nominally civil-society character of fair trade. This has several implications. The public nature of organic standards and the application of the rules by a government agency have left them susceptible to overtly political influences; the multiple instances of direct Congressional interference with the NOSB rules on behalf of particular industries or companies provide ample evidence. On the other hand, the legal framework for organics does lead to fewer seriously credible alternative certification schemes that could compete closely with organic. In fair trade, there are already multiple challengers to the FLO labeling system (e.g. the Ethical Trade Initiative, the Utz Kapeh coffee seal, and other claims of “fairly traded” products that range from genuine to fraudulent). Only public pressure—and the copyrighted nature of the phrase “fair trade certified”—stand in the way of a further proliferation of “faux fair” claims. The difference in the locus of standard setting and certification is important in other ways as well. It influences the tactics employed by mainstream agrifood firms to capture and weaken the standards and labels. Companies interested in altering the organic standards have used one part of the state against another, bypassing the NOSB to cut back room deals that surface only at the last minute in Congressional riders. Nevertheless, these changes are ultimately a matter of public record and subject to more transparency and scrutiny. With fair trade, in contrast, there is no legal regulatory framework, nor a requirement of transparency. Many of the deals that have most compromised the standards (such as removing the 5% minimum entry threshold on behalf of Starbucks) are presented as *faits accomplis*, and can be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. Corporate participants have also been able to “forum-shop” among the multiple national initiatives to establish precedents regarding licensing; the NIs in the U.S. and U.K. have proven more amenable to their desires than those in other consumer countries.

A second difference regards the structure of third-party certification. The USDA National Organic Program accredits a large number of private independent (and also public) certifiers, but since 2002 these entities have not been permitted to uphold more stringent standards; the USDA standards serve as both a “ceiling” and a “floor,” removing almost all certifier autonomy. In fair trade, on the other hand, there is a single non-profit, “independent” certification and licensing entity for each country where fair trade goods are sold. These NIs are charged with applying the FLO standards, but in practice there is a good deal of variation and autonomy. The NIs are susceptible to political pressure—whether from corporations or from activist groups engaged in “shaming” tactics—and thus are the site of active contestation over the application of standards. On the other hand, FLO is the sole entity that establishes standards regarding price setting and the inclusion of new products and production methods; here the struggle between corporate, producer, and civil-society interests has been at least as intense.

Third, while cooptation has occurred in both organics and fair trade, it differs in both form and degree. Are the processes of capture and weakening of standards more advanced in one initiative than the other? The answer seems to be clear: the organic sector (at least in the U.S.) is both subject to more industry influence, and its standards more compromised, than fair trade—at least at the present moment. Guthman observes that “the threat that agribusiness would dilute the meanings and practices of organic agriculture has in some respects already been borne out” (2004a, p. 312). The major battles over organic standards arguably have already been fought and settled, although ongoing skirmishes continue. The governmental nature of the USDA organic standards has tended toward a state of legal finality that is missing from the fair trade arena. For fair trade, some of the most crucial decisions over the direction of the initiative are unfolding as we write, and may be somewhat more subject to renegotiation based on shifting forces. The barn door is partially open, but the horse has yet to make a full escape.

Theoretical and practical implications

We now turn to consider the theoretical and practical implications that can be drawn from these twin cases of standards weakening and partial capture of governance institutions, and the lessons that other (current or future) agrifood alternative movements might draw from these developments. What could movement-oriented participants have done differently—if anything—to avoid these outcomes and to retain greater integrity in the standards of these systems? How best might future alternative agrifood

initiatives, particularly those based on certification, anticipate and avoid some of these traps? And how could they design their initiatives to more effectively guard against cooptation, and prevent—or at least delay—the weakening of standards and the capture of the governance bodies by large-scale players?

The key point, we suggest, is that the potential for economic success was underestimated because of these movements’ strong opposition to facets of mainstream capitalist behavior, but not to the process of accumulation itself. As a result, adequate barriers to capitalist accumulation were not established and/or maintained. More specifically, we identify four major areas from both cases where barriers to accumulation could have been made stronger: (1) the speed of market growth, (2) the scale of participants, (3) the structure of governance institutions, (4) and the nature of movement responses.

The story of both organics and fair trade can be read as a parable of the risks of rapid growth. Consumer demand in both markets has mushroomed in recent years. However, this scaling-up has created a positive feedback loop, driving the processes of institutionalization in governance bodies, strengthening the hand of new larger corporate players who are best able to meet the new demand, and paving the way for capture. Many observers emphasize a distinction between two visions: volume growth at any cost (“growth for growth’s sake”) versus growth with attention to foundational principles (or “growth to further a vision”) (e.g., Erickson 2004). According to former FLO board member Paola Ghillani, “the Fairtrade label has grown so fast, but [it] has forgotten to invest enough in growth management” (Bahra 2009).

Second, the scale of participants matters. In both organics and fair trade, the standards critically failed to include any explicit requirements regarding scale from the outset. Guthman (2004b) documents the tendencies toward intensification in the organic sector, arguing that this will invariably lead to a reduction of the organic premium, thus further disadvantaging small producers. Likewise in fair trade, the certification of agribusiness plantations (in fresh fruit, tea, flowers, and other commodities) directly threatens the income of smaller producers of these same crops. Yet is this anything other than the tendency of capitalism toward consolidation? Allen and Kovach (2000, p. 224) argue that “[i]n the long run, capitalist dynamics will tend to bring about changes in the standards themselves ... there will be pressure to weaken the standards—to formulate standards more conducive to larger numbers of firms entering the marketplace.” In other words, they say, the entry of large players will inevitably lead to cooptation. If this is true, then would any safeguards be adequate to protect the organic and fair trade systems (and their smaller producers) against domination and cooptation by the large

actors? Perhaps newer alternative agrifood initiatives—particularly those based on certification—should instead design explicit barriers within their rules and standards that simply prevent the entry of big players. Certainly a requirement mandating small-scale production and agro-ecological diversity in farming systems would help to stave off low-bar mainstream competitors, but alternatively such initiatives might consider drawing standards “boundaries” to also include medium-sized agricultural producers who can help the initiative reach critical mass (see Lyson et al. 2008), yet keep the door closed to larger conventional players. How big is too big?

A third set of observations relates to the structure of the institutions that govern these initiatives. Because the pressures for accommodation and capture by large corporate participants can become so intense, the initial design and structure of the bodies that regulate/govern access and certification is crucial, even determinative. To the extent that the principles and visions of the movements’ founders can be incorporated into the “DNA” of these bodies—their bylaws, board and committee structures, lines of authority, and funding mechanisms, to name just a few—there exists at least the possibility of safeguarding against cooptation. The issue of the allocation of power, both formal and informal, within such initiatives raises a series of important questions. How will representation be allocated between different participants and constituencies? Can movement pioneers or social-movement constituencies be guaranteed sufficient ongoing representation to ensure that their core principles remain in control of the organization, and how will this power be kept as the coalition becomes more diverse? What is the appropriate role of for-profit commercial entities in these structures? Do the organizations’ funding, standard setting, or decision-making mechanisms set up unanticipated tensions between principles of sustainability or social justice, and practices that will eventually come to undermine those values? Future initiatives should consider how to frame a more decentralized, semi-autonomous system that could foster competition among producers for the highest possible standard, rather than a more centralized standard that pushes practices toward the lowest common denominator. Another possibility is prohibitions or disincentives against “mixed operations.” This issue is most salient in organics—critics argue that one fatal flaw in USDA Organic standards is the inclusion of farms that produce both organic and conventional produce—but also holds true for fair trade, where transnational firms can enter the lucrative niche while buying only a tiny proportion of their supply at fair trade terms. The inclusion of both kinds of “mixed” operations by definition favors dabblers and large firms with little or no ideological commitment.

The locus of standard setting also matters. As the case of organics clearly shows, state control over standards making

and certification can be especially problematic; in the U.S. system, it leaves the standards highly vulnerable to political interference on behalf of specific industries and even specific companies. Yet certifications and standards based in civil society can also be vulnerable to pressures from the same actors, albeit through different channels and tactics. Such non-governmental regulatory bodies have their own problems—particularly a lack of transparency, as in the case of FLO and the NIs—but ultimately, they appear to be preferable to state regulation. Future agrifood initiatives would do well, we argue, to steer clear of state-based standards. However, that alone may not be protection enough, as both state and non-state standards are subject to “downward harmonization” within the context of neoliberal economic globalization (Mutersbaugh 2005).

Finally, there is the broader question of what consumers understand about (and how they interpret) these struggles for the soul of organics and fair trade. There have been some high-profile mainstream journalistic treatments of the debates regarding organics (e.g., Pollan 2006) and the controversies over corporate fair trade (e.g., Rogers 2004; Goigoi 2008; Bahra 2009). However, it is unclear to what extent fair trade consumers, for example, could make the jump from “looking for the label” and “voting with their dollars” to activism directed at the very administrators of those labeling systems. What is the potential role of such “citizen-consumers” beyond the constrained realm of the grocery store? Clearly, massive consumer input was vital in keeping any teeth in the original USDA Organic rule, and organizations such as OCA have worked to keep those consumers active, enlisting them in efforts to forestall further watering-down of organic standards, and pushing corporate licensees to live up to a more meaningful version of fair trade (e.g., Baden-Meyer 2008). Are the broader (and growing) ranks of self-proclaimed “green consumers” potentially a force that could be harnessed by movements to restore or retain the integrity of the system? Can movement advocates educate fair trade and organic consumers about the “real story” of corporate cooptation in these systems without alienating or losing them entirely? One important question for further research in this area would be what effect the public criticisms of cooptation by movement activists (e.g., advocates of “beyond organic” or “deep fair trade”) have on consumer perceptions of the organic or fair trade labels.

In his book *The Burning Season*, author Andrew Revkin quotes the late Brazilian agronomist and activist Jose Lutzinger: “In the environmental movement, our defeats are always final, our victories always provisional. What you save today can still be destroyed tomorrow—and so often is” (2004, pp. xx–xxi). Multi-faceted resistance to the cooptation of organics and fair trade has indeed been successful at staving off further degradation of standards in

some cases, but many of the losses already sustained likely cannot be reversed. Cooptation has transformed fair trade and organics in a broader sense as well. The process of establishing and enforcing standards has de-emphasized or ruled out of bounds the most transformative elements that were present at the inception of both movements: the damning ecological critique of industrial agriculture that guided the organic pioneers, and the urgency of creating truly alternative and socially just trading relations and institutions that informed the founders of fair trade. The result is the simplification of the operational meaning of both initiatives toward a single variable: allowable versus prohibited inputs in organics, and payment of a minimum price in fair trade, the level of which is no longer linked to actual family livelihoods.

The success of these alternatives—albeit in weaker form than their founders intended—has had a significant impact on agrifood systems: the more limited set of issues they now represent have at least become part of mainstream public discourse. Indeed, this is one effective argument for continuing efforts at the margins to strengthen and/or protect the existing standards, in addition to creating even newer alternatives. Beyond this, advocates for socially just and ecologically sound food systems can aim to learn from their creeping defeats, and design structures to protect their ever-provisional victories and render them less amenable to further accumulation.

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