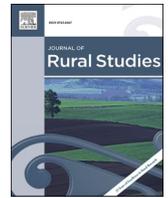


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Rethinking conventionalisation: A view from organic agriculture in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

The so-called conventionalisation of organic farming debate revolves around tensions between organic agriculture as an alternative to the dominant agri-food system and the rise of organic agribusiness. A contested issue is the conceptualisation and assessment of the impact of capitalist expansion in the organic sector on the transformative power of alternative agriculture. This article engages with critiques on Guthman's analysis of conventionalisation and the concept of bifurcation. It brings a new perspective to the debate by introducing a case from the Global South, which reveals four different trajectories of organic agriculture development and certification in the Philippines. The expansion of organic farming differs considerably from the general representation in the conventionalisation debate. What becomes central in the debate is not agribusiness dominance but what kind of small farmers are considered the subject and object of organic agriculture development. Rather than rejecting Guthman's political economy approach for creating binary oppositions, the article expands on its analytical potential to understand the empirical heterogeneity of organic forms of production and the conditions for politics that aim to create alternative economic spaces.

1. Introduction

Organic agriculture is often seen as path out of poverty for smallholder farmers in the Global South. Reducing the use of external inputs and increasing income through premium prices for farm products would counter market dependence while improving livelihoods. Recently, too much optimism about this development road has been tempered. Organic certification schemes may present additional burdens and impose changes to producers, their production relations and processes (Wilson and Mutersbaugh 2020). Agribusiness expansion in the organic sector can introduce new pressures on the production conditions of smaller, more dedicated producers (Guthman 2004a; 2014). Furthermore, as we will show, state regulation of certification could potentially exclude small scale organic producers from the organic label, marginalising them even further. The mainstreaming of organic into an 'organic lite' (Guthman 2004b) or 'input substitution' approach (Rosset and Altieri 1997) has sparked tensions in the organic movement resulting in an urge to reinvigorate organic farming. The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) has formulated a new vision, Organic 3.0, which should be more inclusive while promoting sustainability (Arbenz et al., 2016, 2017). Another response has been to

increase the options of resource-poor farmers to certify and market organic products through the development of participatory guarantee systems (PGS), which rely on active participation of producers and evade the cost of third-party certification. They are seen as a social justice-oriented alternative to the ongoing conventionalisation or industrialisation of organic agriculture (Nelson et al., 2016). Underlying these debates is the notion that the mainstreaming of organic agriculture has not always produced an organic farming system as envisioned by critics of industrialised forms of agriculture and the dominant global agri-food system.

Original organic agriculture (following IFOAM's organic 1.0 classification; Arbenz et al., 2017) embraced principles such as ecological holism, diversified farming systems with sustainable nutrient cycles, and severe restrictions on the use of synthetic inputs and genetically modified crops. Furthermore, socio-economic principles such as the small-scale of farming units, close relationships between producers and consumers based on trust, and prioritising people and the environment over profit are seen as an alternative to the highly capitalised and commodified global supply chains (Badgley et al., 2007). Over the last decades, the organic farming sector has grown in many countries as a result of growing demand, good prices, better market infrastructure, and

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the development of standards and regulations. This has created space for new agribusiness development and, as critics argue, an industrialisation of organic agriculture, including large scale, organic mono-cropping. This development has been critically discussed in the so-called 'conventionalisation debate', with different positions about how to characterise this mainstreaming of organic agriculture and whether this mainstreaming is problematic or not (e.g., Best 2008; Buck et al., 1997; Constance et al., 2015; Coombes and Campbell, 1998; Darnhofer et al., 2010; De Wit and Verhoog, 2007; Guthman, 2004c; Lockie and Halpin 2005; Michelsen 2001; Tovey 1997). The conventionalisation debate raises questions about the relationships between production units and the wider political-economic context, the dynamics of agrarian change, and the transformative power of alternative development trajectories.

The debate reflects concerns within the sector that the involvement of agribusiness type organic producers and marketers is watering down the original technical-ecological and socio-economic principles of organic farmers and consumers. For example, farms specialising in a single product using high-tech, mono-cropping systems and targeting export markets may comply with formal organic agriculture standards but contrast with the original image of small-scale farming based on nutrient-cycling, crop rotation, diversified farming systems, biodiversity conservation, and orientation towards the local market and community. Guthman's iconic study of Californian organic agriculture (2004c) argues that the new dominance of organic agribusiness shapes the dynamics of the whole sector by determining prices and land values. Thereby it limits the transformative potential of organic agriculture, not subverting industrial agriculture but reproducing it and adapting it to new consumer values. Other authors have criticised Guthman and the earlier publication by Buck et al. (1997) for staying within the logic of capitalist agriculture, thus obscuring that capitalist expansion has not eliminated small producers (Pratt 2009: 172) and denying that smallholders are able to resist concentration and specialisation (Coombes and Campbell 1998; Darnhofer et al., 2010). At stake is the understanding of the nature of the so-called 'bifurcation' of the sector into, on the one hand, organic agribusiness and, on the other hand, artisanal producers employing 'deep organic movement' practices, and whether the latter are marginalised when organic production expands. Critics of Guthman and Buck et al. emphasise the inability of a structural analysis of conventionalisation to capture the full empirical heterogeneity of forms of production within and between countries (Darnhofer et al., 2010; Lockie and Halpin 2005).

In our view, this noteworthy debate has remained inconclusive. In this paper we take a different perspective by including a case from the Global South, specifically the Philippines. The debate has primarily revolved around cases from the 'North', including California (Buck et al., 1997; Guthman 2004b) and other states in the USA (Constance et al., 2015; Goldberger 2011; Goodman 2000), Canada (Hall and Mogorodoy 2001), EU countries (Best 2008; De Wit and Verhoog, 2007; Michelsen 2001; Tovey 1997), New Zealand (Campbell and Liepins 2001; Campbell and Rosin 2011; Coombes and Campbell 1998), and Australia (Jordan et al., 2006; Lockie and Halpin 2005; Lyons et al., 2004). Looking at a different context in the Global South and providing a more complex theorisation of the variations among smallholder farmers and how they connect with organic agriculture initiatives could renew the debate and shift it into a new direction. The key question about the development of organic farming in the Philippines is not so much about large versus small organic businesses, or about large agribusiness becoming dominant in the organic sector, but concerns a contrast between organic agriculture as an alternative survival and livelihood strategy of small, resource-poor farmers, and organic agriculture as a business niche for small, market-oriented farmers. Different development strategies can be observed in this case, NGO-driven ones that target livelihood improvement and a government modernisation strategy that promotes the expansion of organic agriculture production under the labels of national food security and profit-making in the value chain. Rather than focussing on agribusiness-driven reintroduction of

industrialised production relations in the organic sector we raise here the question what kind of farmer is envisioned as the key object and subject of the development of organic agriculture.

This question is also relevant for the broader debates about the future of agriculture and how to explain empirical heterogeneity of types of farmers and farming systems in relation to divergent agricultural development trajectories. The capitalist and non-, anti-, or post-capitalist nature of particular forms of production and classification of different types of producers or peasants are recurring points of contention in the debates on food sovereignty and peasant autonomy (Bernstein 2014; Jansen 2015; Tilzey, 2017; van der Ploeg, 2014). Here, our contribution dovetails with recent theorizations that go beyond a supposed opposition between a rigid 'structuralism' versus a 'localism plus agency' (Tilzey 2017, 2018). It also complements the literature on agrarian capitalist dynamics in the Philippines, which has mapped a variety of political struggles of a differentiated peasantry. These struggles include the search for alternatives to neoliberal-modern chemical agriculture to address vulnerability and ensure resilience of farmers (Broad and Cavanagh 2012; Heckelman et al. 2018), access to land and land reform (Borras et al., 2007; Tadem 2015; Wright and Labiste 2018), the rights and cultural claims of indigenous communities (Dressler and Pulhin 2010; Rutten, 2016), the contestation of modern technologies in plantations and contract farming schemes (de la Cruz and Jansen 2018; Nikol and Jansen 2020), and challenges to modernisation and agrarian development as models for rural development (Bachman et al. 2009; Tadem 2012).

The next section discusses the different theoretical views on the concepts of conventionalisation and bifurcation. The third section contrasts two policy narratives that reflect differences in current thinking about agrarian development in the Philippines. On the one hand, the National Organic Agriculture Program (NOAP) aims for achieving food security and economic growth by advocating agricultural intensification (BAFPS 2012). On the other hand, the approach of the organic farmer network *Magsasaka at Siyentipiko para sa Pag-unlad ng Agrikultura* (MASIPAG) focusses on securing livelihoods of resource-poor farmers. The section also explores the hybridisation of organic practices and conventional methods at the local level.¹ The fourth section discusses the confusions about the bifurcation model of conventionalisation. We argue that recent critiques of the political economy approach of conventionalisation unnecessarily focus on the bifurcation concept, in particular its supposed inability to acknowledge smallholder, 'non-capitalist' forms of production and their resistance against the dominant agri-food system. Such a critique misses a key point of the underlying theory of agrarian political economy: even forms of production that appear to be non-capitalist or actively resist capitalism do engage in capitalist processes 'from below' and are therefore equally subject to changes in capitalist dynamics in the sector, as happens during conventionalisation. The crux of this argument is that it recognises the pressures within capitalism leading to a variety of transition paths in agrarian change and the multiple determinations underlying the diversity of farm types. Only by doing so we can come to grips with the contradictions, tendencies, and patterns of dominance in the development of organic agriculture and alternatives to the dominant agri-food system.

¹ The Philippine case study is based on an analysis of printed text, including government documents (laws, policy-programmes), newspaper items, and press releases that happened continually between 2015 and 2020. It is combined with fieldwork in the Philippines in July 2015 and March–October 2019. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with MASIPAG staff and a researcher-extensionist affiliated with a national university who is also part of the NOAP technical working group (TWG). Data of the farming community case was collected in the Western Visayas in July 2015 and included observation of farming practices and interviews with an active MASIPAG farmer coordinator of the community and 26 MASIPAG farmers.

2. Conventionalisation, bifurcation, and literature on the Global South

After Buck et al. (1997) triggered the discussion about conventionalisation, various meanings have been attached to this concept. The two characteristic processes of conventionalisation were 'appropriation', defined as "the processes by which products and processes once integral to on-farm production are refashioned as inputs", and 'substitution', defined as "processes by which post-production value-added becomes a high proportion of the total value of commodities" (Guthman 2004b: 304). The variety of overlapping definitions of conventionalisation that followed, capture several important trends in the organic sector. First, a shallow interpretation and dilution of IFOAM's organic principles occurs when these are codified in formal, largely technical standards. Values such as biodiversity, self-sufficiency, long term nutrient cycles, community relationships, and human-scale producer-consumer linkages are neglected or become less relevant (Lockie and Halpin 2005). Organics as alternative becomes less distinguishable for the consumer thus hampering long term growth (De Wit and Verhoog, 2007). Technically, the importance of crop rotation, intercropping, mixed farming systems, and farm-based reproduction of soil fertility may be ignored. Second, intensification, specialisation, economies of scale, and longer value chains become common in organic agriculture (Best 2008; Buck et al., 1997; Coombes and Campbell 1998; Guthman 2004b; Hall and Mogorodoy 2001). Third, growth of the organic sector is increasingly driven and controlled by agribusiness (directly in production, input delivery, market development) who simply incorporate environmental values into their business strategies (Jansen and Vellema 2004).

While the literature shows considerable agreement that such conventionalisation occurs, it disagrees about how to assess the effects and implications of conventionalisation. Several arguments challenge the original conventionalisation thesis. First, conventionalisation, as agribusiness taking over production, is not 'inevitable' (Darnhofer et al., 2010) and smallholders continue to exist (Lockie and Halpin 2005). Although capital gets involved in organic agriculture, it does not necessarily undermine but can co-exist with other forms of production and underlying values (Campbell and Liepins 2001; Coombes and Campbell 1998). From the viewpoint of its critics, the conventionalisation thesis makes universal claims based on the single case of California and only sees a linear expansion of the capitalist mode of production. Second, it has not been proven that conventionalisation undermines the transformative potential of the organic approach (as suggested, for example, by Tovey 1997). Phenomena like farmers' markets and local food networks continue to grow (Lockie and Halpin 2005). The conventionalisation thesis is considered too pessimistic about the possibility for alternative agriculture to change dominant, capitalist values (Pratt 2009).

It would go beyond the scope of the paper to fully compare whether the critiques of inevitability, universality, linearity, and political pessimism actually apply to the work of Guthman. We will focus on the highly contested concept of bifurcation, originally a term casually dropped by Buck et al. (1997: 8) to indicate an emerging differentiation between organic growers as "large operators specialise in the mass production of a few high-growth, high-profit crops, while smaller farms continue to diversify their strategies, employing artisanal methods to grow a variety of marketable crops". Buck et al. argue that the strategies of large growers who "control wholesale and markets, [...] influence planting and crop decisions of smaller farmers" (ibid.). Hence, this approach not just identifies the existence of very different forms of production but also argues that their development is interdependent. Since this casual introduction, bifurcation has become the signifier for an organic sector that divides into two distinct types of producers as conventionalisation unfolds: large agribusiness applying a conventionalised-organic production system versus artisanal growers practicing 'deep movement' organic agriculture (Darnhofer et al., 2010). On the one hand, the

concept has become a focus of critique. Darnhofer et al. (2010) state that bifurcation is not well enough theoretically informed and therefore ill-suited to grasp the empirical heterogeneity of conventionalisation. Lockie and Halpin (2005) suggests that it promotes dualisms and inappropriately correlates differences in farming scale with differences in farming practices. On the other hand, it has been romanticised by Tei (2014) who considers bifurcation as a pluralisation of organic interpretations, which serves to continually adjust different certification systems and therefore ensures the durability and sustainability of organic agriculture as a whole. Looking at these different references to bifurcation, the question emerges what happened with two interrelated aspects in the work of Buck et al. and Guthman that have been written out, at worst, or not fully recognised, at best, in most of the critiques of bifurcation and the dominance of capitalist expansion. These are the relational character of the organic sector in the conventionalisation thesis and the idea that 'agrarian structure' does not simply refer to a fixed external economic power determining farming in all its details but to underlying relationships and processes that shape the reproduction and dynamics of different forms of production.

Some discussion of the notion of bifurcation appears in case studies in the Global South. For example, Gómez Tovar et al. (2005) endorse the bifurcation concept to describe a bimodal situation in Mexico with two organic sub-sectors selling to different markets. One with large producers that directly contract with international buyers and one with small producers who sell to other networks such as Fair Trade buyers, often with group certifications. Blanc (2009), in his study on Brazil, touches upon the conventionalisation debate and the notion of bifurcation when comparing long organic supply chains via retailers with a case of a community oriented conversion to organic farming. Cid-Aguayo (2011), studying a case in Chile, aligns more with the critics of Guthman, arguing that the identification of conventionalisation would lead to fatalistic conclusions. However, these studies, do not sufficiently discuss the underlying differences in theoretical positions in the conventionalisation debate. Nevertheless, studies on the Global South tend to describe a different type of empirical context. For example, Gao et al. (2017) describe for China how recognised organic production has started in the agribusiness-driven export sector and only later translated to other forms of production, a sort of reversed conventionalisation. In the Philippines, the furtherance of organic agriculture first emerged as a bottom-up rural development strategy and was later, independently, introduced and promoted by the capital's upper middle class as consumer lifestyle reflecting the health, sustainability and social concerns that have driven the organic movements in the Global North. We premise that case studies from the Global South can be used to resolve deadlocks in the debates on organic sector development and conventionalisation thus far empirically informed by the North.

3. Two policy narratives in the development of organic farming in the Philippines

3.1. The emergence of organic farming in the Philippines

The current configuration of organic agriculture in the Philippines includes different perspectives: organic farming as a bottom-up rural development strategy of the organic movement; the private sector perspective which introduced organics as producer/consumer lifestyle whose health, social and environmental concerns speak to the upper-middle class; and the governmental-institutional-driven organic agriculture as high-value niche of the agricultural sector.

The emergence of the organic movement in the Philippines is closely tied to resistance against the late dictator Marcos and his *Masagana 99* agricultural modernisation programmes that had introduced Green Revolution technologies (Chandler 1979; Mendoza 2004). By the mid-1980s many farmer organisations and progressively-minded agricultural scientists were observing increasing poverty, food insecurity and debt-incurred land loss among small farmers and attributed these

problems to use of commodified fertilisers and pesticides. To address these problems, critical farmers, scientists, and civil society representatives gathered at the national BIGAS conference (*Bahanggunian Hinggil sa Isyu ng Bigas*, or Conference on Rice Issues) in 1985. Now considered the birth moment of the Philippine organic movement, they established a rice breeding project called *Magsasaka at Siyentipiko para sa Pag-unlad ng Agrikultura*, in short MASIPAG,² that would retrieve and develop traditional rice varieties that performed well without synthetic inputs (Briones 2002; Santos 2011). MASIPAG since developed into a large, well-known farmer network that has continuously challenged chemical-intensive farming and capitalist, industrialised agriculture promoted by the state's modernisation-focused agricultural programmes (Briones 2002; Santos 2011; Carating and Tejada 2012). It continues to promote organic farming as alternative, more appropriate small-farmer technology and path for rural development.

MASIPAG, while a key player, is certainly not the only organisation active in the organic movement. At the time of writing, IFOAM has 24 Philippine affiliates, MASIPAG being the oldest with thirty-plus years membership (IFOAM 2020a). While the movement has grown and diversified politically, the diverse set of organisations reiterate the link between organic agriculture and rural development as they combine pro-poor, pro-environment (i.e. anti-chemical), and anti-big business narratives with practical alternative agriculture approaches (Briones 2002; Carpenter 2005; Salazar 2014; Santos 2011). Noteworthy organisations involved include KMP, PAKISAMA, SEARICE, and La Liga Policy Institute (Briones 2002).

Private sector actors involved in organic farming emerged in the 1990s and include most notably *Altertrade Philippines Inc.*, 2020 OPTA and OCCP. Altertrade, founded as a 'trade-not-aid' initiative addressing poverty eradication among small farmers, was the country's first producer to obtain international organic certification for export of sugar and banana (Briones 2002), obtaining its ECOCERT-IMO certification in 1995 (Altertrade Philippines Inc., 2020). OPTA, the Organic Producers and Trade Association founded in 1995, comprises businesses, NGOs, and farmers, connecting the capital's consumers interests in healthy and sustainable food with local organic producers (IFOAM 2020b). Recognising the benefits of the organic label, OPTA and MASIPAG jointly set up the Organic Certification Center of the Philippines (OCCP) in the late 1990s, the first of two national third party certifiers. MASIPAG however left the OCCP soon after, to develop its own alternative, low-cost and therefore better suited PGS for its farmer members (personal communication MASIPAG and NOAP TWG). These private sector actors, while not denying the rural development trajectory of organic farming, added a different pathway to organic development with stronger market-orientation to cater to the health, sustainability and fairness values of an urban consumer base.

Since 1986, the Philippine government has considered organic agriculture a policy issue. It published an Integrated Pest Management and Balanced Fertilisation Programme in the 1990s and established a Task Force on Organic Agriculture to design institutional support for organic agriculture in the early 2000s (Briones 2002). In 2005, President Macapagal-Arroyo initiated the drafting of an organic agriculture law, which resulted in the Organic Agriculture Act of 2010 (Macapagal-Arroyo 2005; Salazar 2014). The accompanying National Organic Agriculture Program (NOAP) of 2012 outlines concrete strategies to develop the organic sector. Observers note that these various governmental steps can be accredited to persistent civil society lobbying (Cabigas and Morala 2011; Salazar 2014). At the same time, as we show below, the government policy programme presents organic agriculture as a high-value business niche complementing the 'conventional'

agricultural sector.

Today the Philippines hosts a respectably sized and diverse organic sector, although accurate numbers are scarce and divergent (Piadozo et al., 2016). To our knowledge, especially exporting organic agribusiness has not been mapped in existing literature. Different sources report very different sizes of the organic farming area: for 2016, 343,375 ha according to DA - Department of Agriculture, (2016), and 198,309 ha according to IFOAM, of which 150,000 ha dedicated to organic coconut (Willer and Lernoud 2018).³ This constitutes 75 per cent of all organic coconut area in Asia, making the Philippines the biggest exporter of organic coconut (Willer and Lernoud 2018). In 2017, 85 operators were third party certified (BAFS 2017) and MASIPAG (2020) reported to have reached 30,000 small farmers. Exporting agribusiness obtain international certification to comply with the standards in their destination markets (Piadozo et al., 2016) and therefore do not have national Philippine certification.⁴ Some larger producers cultivate the same crops both organically and with synthetic inputs in different locations (e.g. Marsman Drysdale Group) (Marsman Drysdale, 2012).

3.2. Divergent approaches to organic farming: MASIPAG and NOAP

MASIPAG and NOAP construct very different narratives of organic agriculture, especially in terms of the kind of farmers, farming system, and organisation of the organic sector. MASIPAG's narrative has developed as a response to the classic vision of modern, industrial agriculture wherein rice is produced with high-quality hybrid seeds and synthetic inputs. It is a critique of the poverty-increasing effects of Green Revolution packages and the status quo of industrialised agriculture. MASIPAG sees organic farming as the more viable path for rural development that can achieve food security and -sovereignty. Its narrative therefore represents a typical alternative agriculture system that relies on agroecological principles as opposed to industrialised, commodified production relations. Synthetic inputs are not simply replaced by organic ones, but are substituted with organic management practices and on-farm reproduction of farm materials. On-farm production is diversified, meeting the various needs of the farm (raw materials needed elsewhere or in the next production cycle, seeds, and feeds) and household (balanced diet of the household and income). Marketing of fresh and processed produce is encouraged, but food for the household should be prioritised. Labour is supplied by the household and traditional labour sharing systems based on reciprocity. Small-scale farms are part of a decentralised food system wherein previously marginalised farmers are self-sufficient and able to sell organically produced surplus on local markets. The MASIPAG Farmers Guarantee System (MFGS), a PGS based on trust and peer review (Buena 2014), assures organic quality on local markets.

MASIPAG's narrative centres those farmers that lose out under the conditions of the government's narrative(s), and outlines an agrarian political economy in which they can thrive. It addresses farmers who are neither capitalised commodity producers nor fully proletarianised and mainly produce for home-consumption. The network engages in advocacy and practical work with farmers, both of which articulate three important principles: the conservation and development of genetic resources, appropriate technology development, and farmer empowerment (personal communication, MASIPAG staff). Advocacy work happens at local, regional and national levels of government, developing partnerships and creating a supportive institutional environment for organic farmers. MASIPAG's practical work in marginalised farming communities includes farmer-led rice-breeding, training in organic

² MASIPAG, a Tagalog acronym, translates as Farmer-Scientist Partnership for Agricultural Development (Bachmann et al., 2009), while *masipag* is a Tagalog word meaning hard-working or industrious (personal communication, MASIPAG staff).

³ Coconut is in many cases an organic crop by default in the Philippines, yet certified organic coconut only constitutes a small share of this sector.

⁴ This makes these businesses less visible, e.g. IFOAM consults only a share of the international certifiers active in the Philippines for its annual reports (Willer and Lernoud 2018, 342).

management practices and technologies, and organising workshops and conferences to facilitate farmers' exchange of experiences (personal communication, farmers and MASIPAG staff; MASIPAG 2018). MASIPAG is critical of the NOAP's approach, which they consider not viable for poor and marginalised small farmers.

The narrative of the 2012–2016 NOAP outlines a 'conventionalised' organic production system, organised according to industrial, capitalist logics. It resembles conventional agricultural programmes in its employment of an agricultural modernisation discourse of capital-intensive, competitive farms. It fosters ecologically sustainable, environmentally friendly, and safer production systems to increase farm productivity and income opportunities for farmers. Though on-farm production of inputs and low-cost mechanisation are mentioned and self-reliance is not rejected, the main thrust of the programme is to develop commodified organic farming (BAFPS 2012). Well-developed markets for certified seeds and certified organic fertilisers, developed by R&D services, "address the lack [...] of organic inputs and raw materials" (BAFPS 2012: 42). These are considered the main barrier to enter organic markets. The programme focusses on production for national and international markets for which third-party certification schemes are deemed essential (BAFPS 2012). NOAP's model mimics conventional logics as industry-produced, certified-organic inputs seem to replace synthetic ones, a typical example of organics as 'input substitution' (Rosset and Altieri 1997). The latter model, based on increasing integration into large circuits of capital, represents farmers as capitalist producers whose reproduction occurs mostly through commodity relations. Farmers produce exclusively for national and international markets using private certification and necessarily generating profit for investments in the following production cycle. The NOAP narrative actually makes little to no reference to farmers as agents in the production system, and in fact presupposes a broad base of smaller commodity producers and larger farm enterprises.

In describing a mainstreaming and competitive organic sector that contributes to economic growth, the NOAP outlines organic agriculture as a complementary niche in a modern agricultural sector. It receives a 2 per cent share of the annual budget of the Department of Agriculture, about Php 1 billion (€ 18.4 million) in 2012 (Salazar 2014) and up to Php 5 billion from 2017 onwards (BAFS 2018). Additionally, however, the programme makes the private sector, beneficiaries, and local government units responsible for crucial investments and co-funding of projects (BAFPS 2012). Previous studies have noted lacking or weak government support (Heckelman 2019; Mendoza et al., 2020) and the central importance of non-governmental support structures such as NGOs, church leaders and local communities (Salazar 2014). Yet, information on implementation and effects of the NOAP is scarce. IFOAM's annual report of 2018 called the results thus far not convincing, mentioning capacity constraints and a technological view of organic (Willer and Lernoud 2018).

Aside from the clearly divergent narratives, the differences between the two approaches are also expressed in how the institutionalisation of certification has evolved. The Organic Agriculture Act of 2010 only allowed third party certification via accredited certification bodies⁵ (Piadozo et al., 2016). However, MASIPAG and other organisations had been promoting and operating PGS to assure organic quality of produce since the early 2000's. In an official response, IFOAM criticised the law for neglecting small and marginalised farmers, since it focussed on market-led and export-oriented organic agriculture and did not recognise other certification aside from private schemes. Third party schemes would "further marginalise ... The small farmers who must be encouraged instead to practice organic agriculture" (DiMatteo 2010: 2). Indications of third party certification costs vary but are

disproportionately high in comparison to organic small farmers' annual incomes (Piadozo et al., 2016; Bachman et al. 2009). Piadozo et al. (2016) conclude that third party certification is unaffordable to most organic small farmers. After considerable pressure from civil society organisations and IFOAM, PGS was first recognised temporarily until April 1st 2016 (BAFPS 2012). Thereafter, PGS schemes remained operational by avoiding the label organic and relying on close relationships between producers and consumers to convey the organic quality of produce (personal communication MASIPAG staff). Final legal recognition of PGS was of low priority for legislators, and therefore only happened in 2020 (Buena 2020).

The politics around the subject of organic agriculture development of two important yet different organic narratives in the Philippines, and their interaction, have clearly shaped the developments around certification.

3.3. Contrasts and hybridisation in organic farming in the Philippines

The opposition between MASIPAG and the classical modernisation approach underlying NOAP reflects to some extent the paradigmatic conflict between alternative and conventional agriculture outlined by Beus and Dunlap (1990). However, we do not argue that NOAP is a form of conventionalisation and MASIPAG's approach is not. Instead, within a general development of organic agriculture four trajectories can be distinguished. First, the agribusiness orientation of larger export-oriented commodity chains, mediated by direct certification through international certifiers who have operated for some time outside the national context. Second, the path proposed by NOAP of developing capitalised (family) farms ruled by a profit-oriented market rationality, based on specialisation and input substitution, and governed through third party certification. Third, the smallholder who combines subsistence production with local market sales of surplus (sometimes called petty commodity producers). This type of producer benefits from PGS certification through market access and possibility of premium prices for organic rice. Fourth, a category of even more marginal farmers who combine agricultural production for household consumption with other livelihood sources, such as off-farm labour. Their resources are too constrained to survive on farming alone. Organic farming techniques replacing external inputs lead to cost reduction, while on-farm diversification and intercropping are simultaneously strategies for risk reduction. This category of farmers has diverse and ambiguous relations with certification, most importantly PGS. Some farmers will not join a PGS as they do not perceive any benefits, while others value the external confirmation of their organic integrity *ipso facto*. For yet others, additional trainings on organic farming practices and processing products, and additional organisational embedding through PGS membership, are important to their struggle for livelihood security and empowerment. This latter aspect also applies to the third trajectory. The third and fourth trajectories are both included in MASIPAG's activity range for livelihood improvements.

The contrasts between these four categories are reflected in the different certification strategies. This does not mean that the categories are static and fixed. Individual farmers may move in and out or hybridise elements. A reflection on MASIPAG's interventions in one village may serve as case to illustrate how the last two categories of farmers may combine or alternate over time organic practices with conventional, agrochemical inputs. MASIPAG considered the community of Dao a successful example of their approach.⁶ Farmers in Dao mostly grew rice with MASIPAG seeds and corn with traditional local varieties. Farmers indicated that they learned from MASIPAG to prepare a variety of home-made organic fertilisers and practice seed saving (also for exchange with

⁵ Up to 2016, two national certification bodies have been accredited: the Organic Certification Center of the Philippines (OCCP) and Negros Island Certification Service (NICERT) (Piadozo et al., 2016).

⁶ Data on Dao were taken from the Master thesis of the first author, which provides a description of the methodology (available from the authors upon request).

neighbours). They consider that MASIPAG's rice cultivars do not require synthetic fertilisers to grow well and produce a good harvest. Most farmers grow at least two different rice varieties and change varieties regularly. Farm production tends to be diversified as farmers usually own livestock, cultivate fruits and vegetables, and grow between two to seven field crops, combining staple- and other food crops with the production of cash crops. Other sources of cash income include selling labour or running small kiosks. Almost all households have some cash income to cover household expenses (additional food items, schooling, electricity, transportation, clothes, toiletries), indicating households require a disposable income despite the community's remoteness. Being a village of smallholders does not mean that social differentiation is absent. For example, very poor households may live off 1/8th ha for rice production and selling labour, while better-off households own 1 ha for food and cash crop production with a supplementary cash income from a child's city job, whereas well-off households cultivate up to 2 ha of land with food and cash crops and supplementary profits from their kiosk. A culture of debts among the villagers intensified social differences prior to being MASIPAG members.

Despite MASIPAG's activity in Dao, agrochemical use did not disappear. Instead, new complex, mixed patterns of use emerged. Many farmers grew high-value cash crops with synthetic inputs as these would get a higher and more stable market price. Middle-men pay more for conventionally grown crops, i.e. in particular organic carrots and chilli do not meet their standards in size, colour, and taste. Organic peanuts are the main exception. Through a combination of organic rice and corn and a conventionally grown cash crop, farmers could engage in commodity relations without requiring loans or accumulating debts. Synthetic fertilisers also continued to play a role for two other reasons. First, when typhoon Frank in 2008 caused landslides, covering many rice fields in Dao, farmers resorted to direct seeding and synthetic inputs. The uncovering and reconstruction of rice fields is labour-intensive and could not be completed before planting, leaving many plots covered with infertile mud. Affected farmers had been using chemical fertilisers ever since those landslides, but were gradually converting to organic cultivation again.⁷ Second, many farmers reported that they, as a last resort, "occasionally" or "if necessary" applied synthetic fertiliser on their otherwise organically grown MASIPAG varieties. One farmer explained that they "do not pour it but give small sprays". In these cases, farmers apply chemical fertilisers occasionally, in addition to organic management practices, and not regularly or exclusively. Hence, farmers in Dao perceive livelihood improvement through organic farming, but this is sometimes combined with Green Revolution technologies. The result is a variety of practices and a combination of divergent production logics informing farmer livelihood strategies. On the one hand, farmers continue to value the yield-enhancing properties of synthetic fertilisers and the efficiency of substituting commodified inputs for labour in labour-intensive activities. At the same time, the use of these modern technologies has changed towards a complementary and emergency solution. On the other hand, many interviewed farmers comply with organic farming and MASIPAG, as they firmly believe in the 'good' properties of organic farming. Producing sufficient, healthy food for one's family is a priority for many farmers.

In this section we distinguished NOAP and MASIPAG's approaches to organic agriculture as two different interventions with their respective narratives. These adopt different perspectives on what type of farmer should be the subject of organic farming development. At the same time, differentiated farmers on the ground select and hybridise conventional forms of modernisation with organic farming practices.

⁷ Farmers who resorted to synthetics generally stopped participating in the labour sharing system, which collapsed as a result. This forced other farmers to resort to chemicals as well, as they could no longer meet the labour demand of their organic rice without labour sharing, particularly because buying inputs is cheaper than hiring the necessary labour.

4. Discussion

4.1. Rethinking bifurcation: binary simplicity or complex structuring in a political economic field

The data on the Philippines suggest that we have to let go the idea of conventionalisation as bifurcation. The situation can hardly be described as an agribusiness driven organics that marginalises an older family farm driven organic sector. But does it mean that the critics of Guthman provide a better theorisation? Does Guthman's notion of conventionalisation necessarily deny heterogeneity in organic agriculture and what is the value of the argument that the concept of bifurcation should therefore be replaced with "a more nuanced understanding of the organic agrifood systems" (Schewe 2015)? Schewe (2015) points to the reversion in the use of family labour in New Zealand's organic dairy industry. Lockie and Halpin (2005) observe a mix of smaller and larger operators farming with a variety of motivations without much polarisation in Australia, different from the Californian case described by Guthman. Darnhofer et al. (2010) observe a heterogeneity of practices and forms of production that results from 'farmer reflexivity' and their implementing different principles. Similarly, Pratt (2009) explains variety in forms of organic agriculture as a result of smallholders' agency, logic, and values that are different from mainstream thinking. Against "over-schematic oppositions" (Pratt 2009: 172), Pratt proposes fine-grained assessments that analyse each producer in terms of their own values, objectives, and practices. Hence, the critics pick out of a larger theoretical framework the notion of bifurcation in combination with a preliminary observation that the growth of organic agribusiness is undermining the production conditions of smaller, more agro-ecologically committed operations. In our reading, bifurcation was dropped only casually in Guthman (2004c) and Buck et al. (1997) and did not seem a cornerstone of their conceptual frameworks. Nevertheless, it has become the focus of a critique that understood it as a "grand binary" (Campbell and Rosin 2011) or "reified binary" (Schewe 2015), projecting a linear trajectory to an "inevitable" (Darnhofer et al., 2010) outcome. These critics of the original conventionalisation thesis find a strong claim in the observation that "capitalist expansion has not eliminated small producers" and argue that "if we only track capitalist production, we miss them" (Pratt 2009: 172).

Guthman (2014; 2018) delves into the notion of bifurcation to respond to the critiques. Guthman (2014: 204) concedes that the suggestion in Buck et al. (1997) of a gradual evisceration of organic meanings and value appropriation by agribusiness has not happened, not even in California. She agrees with concerns about using binary thinking "to judge which growers are doing the right thing" (p.194) and precisely argues that "there is no clear relation between size and attention to agroecological concerns (p.195)". Guthman (2018) suggests that while her analysis attempts to differentiate producers according to their production and marketing relations to capture the contrasting dynamics of major developments, critics have instead inferred absolute distinctions. If there is bifurcation it is less about the size of farming operations or farmer values, than about differences in how market dynamics affect "farmers who produce at the behest of grower-shippers and processors" (often growers with conventional farm businesses besides organic ones) and "those who grow independently" (often involved in direct marketing activities) (Guthman 2018: 28). These groups cater to different types of consumers (national retail chains versus alternative local and regional markets) and are "subject to differing competitive pressures, which matter in terms of how organic agriculture might spread" (Guthman 2014: 196). Guthman explains different trajectories of organic producers not by reference to motivations but emphasises distinctions between the different 'pressures', as Guthman calls them, that different types of producers face.

Such a conclusion may not convince all critics as it still is a distinction between two major categories. However, Guthman's reply can also be read as an effort to understand the dynamics of a particular situation

rather than depicting a static and universal configuration. In fact, while criticising her ‘structuralist’ approach (Rosin and Campbell 2009), some critics recognise that Guthman too studies and interprets more complex differences between organic farms (e.g. Darnhofer et al., 2010). We argue that Guthman’s political economy approach basically tries to unravel the multiple determinations and the dynamics that affect and relate different types of producers. This relational approach of the wider organic sector we find absent in some of the critics who concentrate on empirical heterogeneity and individual farmer agency. Furthermore, rather than denying or recognising empirical heterogeneity, what in fact is at stake is how to explain it. For doing so, we may need to shift the debate from a bifurcation versus heterogeneity opposition to one which does not throw out the baby with the bathwater. A political economy approach implies looking at production relations, pressures, conditions, and processes and explains differences not (or not only) in terms of farmer agency but in terms of (changing) conditions that shape the reproduction or transformation of farms. These conditions include wider sets of relationships and in particular the roles of capital accumulation and production of value. Such an approach allows us, for example, to understand the hybridisation observed in Dao. Rather than falling back on an ultimate farmer agency or the always present heterogeneity, we can abstract from differences and hybridisation and identify some key conditions, processes, and contradictions. The variation in farming practices in Dao can be traced back to easily overlooked differences such as land size varying between one-eighth and 2 ha, family size varying between four and eight people, whether fields were affected by the landslides of typhoon Frank, heterogeneity in natural soil fertility of fields, and multiple sources of cash income. Mechanisms that lead to certain farming practices include the absence or presence of the labour sharing system and the power position of middlemen on the local market. Subsequently, as some farmers live on the verge of existence with a small plot to grow rice and selling labour, others own a lot of land or have larger cash incomes through a kiosk or a child sending remittances from their city-job. This petty differentiation within a smallholder village is also reflected in the labour-hiring and cash/kind loans among villagers. Hence, variation in the conditions of farming and agriculture yield a diversity in agricultural practices and livelihood compositions. The diversity of both can only be understood by reference to a multiplicity of underlying structures and causal mechanisms, possibly influenced by contingent events such as typhoon Frank. We consider this view more comprehensive than a reference to farmer agency or reflexivity only.

4.2. Extending the set of structuring relationships: from bifurcation to N-furcation

This paper looked at a situation in the Global South that could not be grasped with the notion of bifurcation. We have seen a configuration of agribusiness type of organic farming, NOAP strategies for stimulating capitalised commodity production, petty commodity organic producers, and organics as subsistence strategy. Each of these with different relationships to certification and marketing strategies. One major lesson of the work of Guthman is the relational character of transitions in the organic sector. In the Philippines, NOAP emerged as a result of pressure by the organic movement and while mobilising government support for market development, input substitution, and capacity building of farmers, it now also defines in what terms MASIPAG’s farmers are able to market their products as organic. Guthman’s political economy studies how farm units are constituted and reproduced within the larger dynamics of capital. This is also a question about what drives the dynamics of a sector. Guthman’s (2004a, 2004c) picture opposing an agribusiness sector vis-à-vis artisanal producers too strongly suggests that development is only driven by capital intensive units. Some critics reproduce this representation, such as Pratt (2009) distinction between capitalist production and “non-capitalist organisational forms” of production, the latter seen as those resisting conventionalisation and

capital. A dichotomous image of capitalist agribusiness versus non-capitalist smallholder agriculture conflicts with our analysis of the Philippine case with its varying degrees in which smallholders’ social relations of production are integrated in circuits of capital —however small and local they may be— and grounded in commodity relations. As Guthman’s political economy suggests, all organic smallholders are, though differently, subjected to conditions of capitalist dynamics. As we have seen, this applies not only to the NOAP small enterprises who are supposed to participate in profitable markets, but also for the MASIPAG smallholders, both petty commodity producers and subsistence survivors. The NOAP narrative pursues capitalised, commoditised social relations of production with specialised commodity producers. MASIPAG’s narrative centres on both petty commodity producers with improved livelihoods and subsistence producers (often semi-proletarians) that are otherwise inserted in local markets of free labour, land, and agricultural products. In both cases, though with different conditions and outcomes, we see a capitalism-from-below (Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen 2018) and a reproduction of farm units being determined by market forces (often very indirectly through land value, the prices of labour, inputs, consumer goods, and so on).

Going beyond the misinterpretation that political economy neglects multiple conditions and diverse outcomes, the approach can help us understand the role of capital in the organic sector as long as we do not assume a single trajectory of capitalist development but recognise multiple transition paths. These paths include varied forms of production, interrelated through and impacting upon a set of conditions (prices of land and products, standards and the setting thereof, spread of organic images among consumers, and so on). By including the situation of the Philippines, and possibly many other countries in the Global South (or the Global North) we may want to adjust the concept of bifurcation. Instead of bifurcation, ‘quadfurcation’ might be a more useful abstraction. Quadfurcation refers to tendencies of social differentiation within the organic sector that yields, *in this case*, four distinct forms of production. These include large capital or agribusiness, Capitalised Commodity Producers as targeted in the NOAP narrative, and Petty Commodity Producers and Subsistence Producers as addressed in MASIPAG’s approach. Quadfurcation should be understood as an ongoing and incomplete process, encompassing different logics of reproduction whose successfulness may vary over time. The outcome is not pre-determined and much depends on struggles around institutions such as national organic policy programmes, often involving the state, social movements, and business actors. The importance of the notion of bifurcation or quadfurcation (or trifurcation or N-furcation in other situations) remains the same, not as an empirical indication but as a theoretical concept that recognises structurally different, though related, forms of reproduction. The notion may also help understand the development, and residual tensions, of different certification strategies that accompanies the reproduction and transformation of particular producer types in a developing organic sector.

4.3. Conventionalisation and the political future of organic farming

Whether conventionalisation encourages or hinders the diffusion of alternative, organic values has been a core issue in the debates. Against the initial view that conventionalisation conflicts with IFOAM’s principles on ecology, health, care and fairness (De Wit and Verhoog, 2007), often generated from within the organic farming movement, many social scientists have argued that the emergence of a conventional look-alike within the organic sector has not eroded organic principles or threatened the survival of local organic, artisanal smallholders (e.g. Best 2008; Darnhofer et al., 2010; Lockie and Halpin 2005; Teil 2014). In the latter perspective ‘organic lite’ and ‘deep organic’ can co-exist and develop more or less independently. This literature has enriched the field, calling for the study and comparison of more situations. However, realising that erosion of deep organic does not necessarily occur in all contexts does not undermine Guthman’s relational point that “...

agribusiness involvement alters the conditions under which *all* organic producers participate in the sector by unleashing the logic of intensification” , , (Guthman, 2004c: 307, emphasis added). Nor does it undercut Guthman’s (2014) argument that the struggle about standards and state intervention in the sector determines to a large extent the ultimate balance (or imbalance) between different transition paths in the organic sector.

With respect to conventionalisation, it has not been our aim to draw conclusions about whether or not it is happening in Philippine organic agriculture along the lines of the debate in the Global North. There is no agribusiness hijacking of an ‘original organic agriculture’ as in the North.⁸ The issue in the Philippine situation is more about the development of organics as an alternative agriculture along different trajectories involving the farmer types identified above and subject in different ways to capitalist dynamics. While agribusiness involvement and the NOAP strategy entail clearer signposts of possible conventionalisation trends, the PGS strategy of MASIPAG supporting petty commodity production cannot be claimed to be void of any conventionalisation. PGS is, amongst other things, a response to increasing capitalist influence in the organic sector and—out of necessity—copies the tool of standards to access the organic label.⁹ Rather than redefining the precise boundaries of the concept of conventionalisation for the Global South, we think the next step in the debate will be to address a set of urgent questions, that we also see emerging from political discussions around amendments of the organic law in the Philippines. Is ‘holistic’ organic agriculture, as advocated for by MASIPAG, only appropriate for poor and marginalised farmers, i.e. the ‘losers’ of capitalism, as a strategy to survive and improve their livelihoods? Should interventions in organic agriculture target specific classes of farmers, aim for general standards appropriate for all forms of production, or pursue genuine transformation of the agri-food system? Does the seemingly peaceful (and arguably useful) co-existence of different organic approaches inevitably undermine efforts of systemic change? Though these questions are similarly relevant for the situations in the North (Constance et al., 2015), their normative and institutional bearing for countries as the Philippines, with organics as a minimal survival strategy for the poor or a niche-developing strategy for modernising farmers, seems even more pertinent.

5. Conclusions

The recent developments in the Philippine organic landscape encourage us to reassess the debate between Guthman’s political economic analysis of the organic sector and her critics. We consider that the critics have privileged too much the notion of bifurcation in the discussion, sometimes opposing it with a plea for more attention for heterogeneity and farmer agency instead of differentiation and structure. We argue that the substitution of farmer agency and heterogeneity for bifurcation risks throwing out the baby with the bath water. The crux of Guthman’s argument is not the final empirical separation into two forms, but the relationships in the organic sector that develop within a larger political economy built on capital accumulation, (rising) land values, and oppressive labour relations. Rather than a rigid binary, the core of the approach is a complex structuring of the reproduction of capital, land, and labour that can easily be overlooked when considering

⁸ ‘Organic by default’, that is farmers who never have used inputs because they were too poor, cannot be seen as the original organic agriculture as depicted in the conventionalisation debate.

⁹ Montefrio and Johnson (2019) studied tensions and contradictions internal to different PGS initiatives in the Philippines. For some initiatives, PGS simultaneously constitutes “a more democratised and inclusive space or organic production” (p.9), yet also strives towards third party certification. The latter is still considered the ideal model, simply unable to fulfill its potential in its current form.

exclusively farmer agency and values as driving forces of organic agriculture. We argue that such an approach and interest in unravelling the diverse but related ways of insertion into a political economy grounded in capital accumulation may provide a different conceptualisation of supposedly ‘non-capitalist’ forms of organic farming. In the case of the Philippines at least four major types can be identified with this approach, a quadfurcation instead of a bifurcation. Large exporting producers, NOAP’s capitalised, commodified forms of production constituting the competitive, market-oriented national sector, and MASIPAG’s holistic approach towards a decentralised food system with concern for agroecology and social justice, stimulating both petty commodity production and improved livelihoods for marginalised farmers. We do not see a convincing reason to call these latter two types non-capitalist. In many ways their reproduction is embedded in a capital-dominated political economy through e.g. work as semi-proletarians, externally defined exchange relationships, land value, or state regulations. Identifying categories does not imply neat and fixed categorisation of individual farmers. Instead, a diversity of farmers and farmer practices can always be observed and is related to the many different underlying social and economic conditions and processes. The notion of multiplicity rather than heterogeneity is helpful to explain such a combination and hybridisation of conditions and possibilities in farmer practices. The conclusion that the reproduction of *all* forms of production, including those sometimes labelled ‘non-capitalist’, is dependent on the dynamics of capital is helpful for understanding the possibilities for alternative economic spaces and the enormous challenges such as how to deal with divisions within the organic sector.

Social differentiation of farmers has consequences for the politics of constructing alternative agriculture; the characterisation of producer types and tensions between them helps to understand the dynamics around certification therein. Differentiation interlocks with the development of the sector and certification, shaping which producers link directly with international certification or benefit from national level third party certification, Participatory Guarantee Systems, or the promotion of organics without any certification. Problems emerge when such strategies conflict with the relations and politics of producers present in the sector.

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