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## Allowing for the projective dimension of agency in analysing alternative food 1 networks

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1 **Allowing for the projective dimension of agency in analysing alternative food**  
2 **networks**

3

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11 **Allowing for the projective dimension of agency in analysing alternative food**  
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13

14 **Abstract**

15 This article argues for including the projective dimension of agency in research into  
16 alternative food networks. Starting from a review of the literature, I show that referring to the  
17 notion of project is useful to answer the questions raised by the use of the term “alternative”  
18 and to reinforce analyses of hybridisation and conventionalisation processes. I argue that  
19 alternative food networks are characterised by a “promise of difference” in the projects of the  
20 actors who promote them. To clarify this notion of project, I rely on the work of French  
21 sociologists concerning the creation of “organised action”. I posit that taking account of the  
22 project amounts to recognising human beings' abilities to imagine and to construct new  
23 collectives such as those that are studied in research into alternative food networks. I also  
24 underscore the need to envision the project not as a clear determinant of action, but rather as a  
25 fuzzy landmark, meaning that negotiation and arbitration are required to set the rules involved  
26 in its implementation.

27 **Key words**

28 Agency, Alternative food networks, Conventionalisation, Fair trade, Food utopias,  
29 Hybridisation

30 **Introduction**

31 Even though alternative food networks are currently a dynamic field of rural studies research  
32 (Goodman et al. 2012), the very use of the term “alternative” continues to cause discomfort.  
33 For example, whereas the subtitle of their book explicitly talks about “exploring alternatives”,  
34 Moya Kneafsey and her co-authors justify themselves by explaining that they see this term as  
35 a “useful shorthand” (Kneafsey et al. 2008, p. 30). Other authors remind their readers that  
36 “alternative” as a concept is problematic and apologise for sticking to it by explaining that it  
37 is the term adopted in other articles (Milestad et al. 2010). The reasons for this discomfort are  
38 well known. Alternative and conventional food networks are not separate worlds, functioning  
39 in radically different ways (Hinrichs 2003, Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Alternative

40 initiatives deserve to be analysed as “hybrid spaces” involving actors and infrastructures of  
41 the conventional networks (Ilbery and Maye 2005). Some of these initiatives also tend to  
42 adopt a portion of the ways in which conventional food systems function, a trend that has  
43 been summed up by the catchword “conventionalisation” (Guthman 2004) and has suggested  
44 sorting alternative food networks according to their levels of alternativeness (Watts *et al.*  
45 2005). On the basis of these findings other researchers even call for dropping and replacing  
46 the notions of “alternative” and “conventional”. According to Larsh Maxey, thinking in terms  
47 of “hybrid spaces” is not enough. This can leave “alternative' and 'conventional' food intact,  
48 as distinct entities with distinct logics and implications” (Maxey 2007, p. 58). To avoid this  
49 danger of essentialisation, Maxey recommends speaking of “sustainable food” instead of  
50 “alternative food”. Henk Renting, Markus Schermer, and Adanella Rossi argue that "the main  
51 shortcoming of the alternative food network concept is that it has no clear normative content  
52 of its own, since it is ultimately defined in terms of its distinction from ‘mainstream’ food  
53 networks" (Renting *et al.* 2012, p. 291). They therefore claim it would be more appropriate to  
54 speak of “civic food networks” and study the place of civil society in food system  
55 governance. Amanda DiVito Wilson (2013) argues similarly that even studying levels of  
56 alternativeness remain unsatisfying, as this relies on abstract and fuzzy notions of alternative  
57 and conventional. She proposes accordingly to call the initiatives known up to now as  
58 “alternative” “autonomous food spaces” and to study how these initiatives build non-capitalist  
59 and non-market exchanges.

60 Should these authors' reluctance to use the term “alternative” be shared? The argument that I  
61 shall defend is that introducing the notion of a “project” offers a way out of this discomfort.  
62 More fundamentally, I shall posit that taking account of the project provides a solid  
63 theoretical foundation for using the term “alternative” and reinforces analysis of the  
64 phenomena of hybridisation and conventionalisation.

65 The first part of this article will explain the circumstances in which the term “alternative” has  
66 been used in rural studies and the reasons why its use has prompted questions. I shall then  
67 advance the idea that explicitly taking account of alternative food network proponents'  
68 projects (plans, reasons and aims) makes it possible to answer these questions. Fair trade,  
69 organic agriculture, and short food supply chains can be analysed as alternative networks not  
70 because their practices truly break with conventional systems, but because of the promise of  
71 difference that is contained in the projects of the collectives that are implementing them. Seen  
72 from this angle, hybridisation and conventionalisation are phenomena related to the actors'

73 projects. The divide that the researcher establishes between the “alternative” and  
74 “conventional” components of “hybrid spaces” (Ilbery and Maye 2005) does not refer to  
75 abstract or essentialised notions but, rather, relates to the projects that the actors put forward.  
76 Similarly, assessment of the deterioration or upholding of alternativeness must be done in  
77 relation to the projects' asserted ends rather than a general ideal.

78 In the second part I shall refine the notion of “project”. That is necessary because the notion is  
79 absent from rural studies and has been defined little in sociological research. Most of the  
80 theoretical references on which I shall rely nevertheless come from French sociological  
81 research into the constitution of “organised action” (Crozier and Friedberg 1980, Friedberg  
82 1997, Reynaud 1997). These researchers consider both organisations and markets to be  
83 collectives created by the establishment of rules. The rules that the actors set themselves are  
84 the conditions of their collective action. The sociology of organised action thus shares with  
85 the economy of conventions and actor-network theory (ANT), which are better known in rural  
86 studies, a concern for the actual conditions under which actions are coordinated. Without  
87 written rules, material devices, or quality conventions, agri-food networks could not exist  
88 (see, for example, Le Velly and Dufeu 2016, Ponte 2016). Several investigations in the  
89 sociology of organised action have, on this basis, also emphasised the importance of the  
90 project (Reynaud 1997, Terssac and Lalande 2002, Reynaud 2003, Segrestin 2004, Bréchet et  
91 al. 2009). In their view, the ongoing changes in the rules indicate the existence of projects, in  
92 the sense of “plans for the future”, by means of which the actors assert their ability to imagine  
93 new ways of organising the collectives in which they participate. In this same vein, I shall  
94 define the project as the reasons and ends that a collective gives itself to turn its action toward  
95 a desired future.

96 This article is mostly theoretical in nature. It is nevertheless rooted in thorough knowledge of  
97 fair trade, short food supply chains, and organic agriculture – fields in which I have been  
98 working since the early 2000s (Le Velly 2017). I shall refer to the findings of surveys in these  
99 fields throughout the article, especially in the third part, in which I shall present two short  
100 case studies revolving around fair trade, the first one concerning the diversity of fair trade  
101 supply chains set up by the federation Artisans du Monde, which is the main alternative trade  
102 organisation in France; and the second one concerning the way the standards committee of  
103 Fairtrade International sets fair minimum prices. Through these two case studies we shall see  
104 that the project is indeed a central reference, the hub around which rules are set and practices

105 are assessed. However, we shall also see how fuzzy a reference it is, one that leaves the door  
106 open to negotiation and arbitration.

## 107 **1. The projects upon which alternative food networks rest**

108 I shall start with what I shall call, very simply, “the 'alternative' problem”. Why do people  
109 speak about “alternative” schemes and systems to refer to initiatives as diverse as fair trade,  
110 organic agriculture, and short supply chains? And why does this adjective raise questions in  
111 the minds of the very researchers who use it (Section 1.1)? Despite the risk of “dualistic” or  
112 “binary” thinking associated with the use of the alternative/conventional pair, I shall reassert  
113 how central the challenge to the idea of alternativeness is because of a promise of difference  
114 specific to alternative food network projects (in the sense of “plans”) (Section 1.2). After that,  
115 I shall show that taking account of these projects strengthens the analysis of hybridisation and  
116 conventionalisation phenomena (Section 1.3).

### 117 *1.1. The “alternative” problem*

118 Why are schemes as different as short food supply chains, fair trade, organic agriculture, and  
119 farm products seen as “alternative” networks? In the late 1990s, the idea behind the first  
120 colloquia and the first publications that put this subject on the research agenda was to use this  
121 term to identify a set of initiatives that diverged from a globalised, capitalistic, industrial  
122 agricultural model that was considered to be dominant. The research stakes at the time were to  
123 be able to account for the existence of more marginal, but nevertheless developing, forms of  
124 organisation of food networks (Goodman and Watts 1997, Murdoch et al. 2000). This work  
125 also had more normative goals. Many of the authors denounced the effects of the conventional  
126 system and put forward the need to turn to systems that operated in different ways, even  
127 independently from the conventional system. For example, initiatives such as Community  
128 Supported Agriculture were described as enabling consumers and farmers to “resist”, “to  
129 secede from”, and to “protect themselves from” the dominant trends in the global food system  
130 (Kloppenburg et al. 1996, Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002). The first publications on fair  
131 trade show us a very similar line of reasoning. They presented fair trade as an alternative that  
132 took shape in “the interstices of globalisation” (Renard 1999) by establishing “re-embedded”  
133 relations between producers and consumers (Raynolds 2000). Similarly, articles published  
134 during the same period in Europe described short food supply chains, agritourism, on-the-  
135 farm processing, organic agriculture, and registered designations of origin as contributing to a

136 “new rural development paradigm” that would be an answer to the multiple crises plaguing  
137 the dominant paradigm of agricultural modernisation (van der Ploeg et al. 2000). They then  
138 highlighted the great differences between conventional and alternative agriculture. Whereas  
139 the former was deemed to be responsible for farmers' impoverishment, ecological  
140 degradation, and health crises, the latter was presented as a source of increased added value  
141 on the farm, of environmental conservation, of closer ties to the locality, and of renewed trust  
142 between producers and consumers (Marsden et al. 2000).

143 This type of analysis quickly triggered criticism within the very research community that  
144 identified with a programme of research into alternative food networks. Its critics pointed to  
145 the risk of “binary” or “dualistic” thinking that tended to postulate the existence of a great  
146 divide between alternative and conventional food networks (Hinrichs 2003, Goodman 2004,  
147 Ilbery and Maye 2005, Morgan et al. 2006, Sonnino and Marsden 2006, Kneafsey et al. 2008).  
148 This criticism was based on a number of findings.

149 First, research showed that alternative and conventional food networks were not separate  
150 worlds. Typically, researchers found that most of the consumers and producers involved in  
151 alternative food networks also participated in conventional schemes, with the consumers  
152 doing the majority of their shopping in supermarkets and the farmers producing and/or selling  
153 part of their output in conventional networks. Next, the motivations of the participants in  
154 alternative food networks were not necessarily very different from those expressed in  
155 conventional systems. For example, in the case of short food supply chains, consumers look  
156 for tasty products, pay attention to price, and ask for a diverse product line, whilst farmers  
157 strive to sell their produce at a good price and do not always want to engage in lengthy  
158 discussions with consumers (Hinrichs 2000, Weatherell et al. 2003, Kirwan 2004, Jarosz  
159 2008). They also underscored the fact that many alternative food networks mobilised some  
160 infrastructure and actors stemming from the conventional system, e.g., industrial  
161 slaughterhouses, wholesalers, supermarkets, market price lists, and so on. Far from  
162 functioning like a separate space independent from conventional systems, the initiatives under  
163 the “alternative” heading presented themselves more as “hybrid spaces” mixing alternative  
164 and conventional elements (Ilbery and Maye 2005, Cleveland et al. 2014).

165 A second set of publications, in a continuation of the first wave, stressed the tensions  
166 generated by the relationship with the conventional system. The research into the  
167 conventionalisation of organic farming that began with Julie Guthman's study of organic  
168 farming in California (Guthman 2004), like more recent investigations of the mainstreaming

169 of fair trade (Raynolds et al. 2007, Jaffee 2010), emphasised the presence of actors from the  
170 conventional system: Capitalistic plantations, agribusiness multinationals, trading companies,  
171 and mass distribution brands are currently involved in fair trade and organic agriculture  
172 supply chains. This research also showed that alternative food networks were not immune to  
173 the industrial production, insecure jobs, price competition, consumer non-information, and  
174 other logics attributed to the conventional systems. This inflection of the researchers' views  
175 may be explained in part by an inflection of practices, especially in the fair trade sector.  
176 However, they also resulted in part from better empirical knowledge and more refined  
177 analysis. For example, the literature began showing how omnipresent competitive behaviour  
178 was not only amongst fair and non-fair trade products but also amongst the various farmers'  
179 organisations involved in fair trade only once in-depth field studies of fair trade farmers'  
180 organisations were carried out (Shreck 2002, Taylor et al. 2005).

181 *1.2. The promise of difference made by the projects underlying alternative food*  
182 *network*

183 Given such findings, might it not be better to stop using the “alternative/conventional”  
184 dichotomy? This risk of “binary” or “dualistic” thinking is what led the authors mentioned in  
185 the introduction to defend the idea of abandoning these terms (Maxey 2007, Renting et al.  
186 2012, DiVito Wilson 2013) or to apologise for using them (Kneafsey et al. 2008, Milestad et  
187 al. 2010). I plead, on the contrary, in favour of continuing to use this  
188 “alternative/conventional” pair, not for reasons of facility, but because it reflects a central  
189 characteristic of the initiatives that are associated with alternative food networks.

190 No longer reasoning in terms of alternative and conventional would amount to losing sight of  
191 the very sense of the approaches taken in alternative food networks. Researchers are not alone  
192 in thinking of fair trade, CSA, and organic farming as “alternative”. For those who promote  
193 such initiatives and those that practise them, they are what I call “promises of difference”:  
194 Promises of other ways of organising production, trade, and/or food consumption and the  
195 promise of the associated benefits (Le Velly 2017). When school cafeteria managers decide to  
196 buy locally and to reorganise the cafeterias' ways of working accordingly, nothing enables us  
197 to say that they do so with the idea of taking part in an alternative food network. However, if  
198 they take such action, it is indeed because they hope that such a change will lead to  
199 differences for themselves and/or the school children and/or local farmers and/or the  
200 environment, etc. The same holds for consumers who decide to take part in a CSA scheme  
201 rather than to continue buying their fruit and vegetables at the supermarket, for volunteers and



202 professionals who invest in the construction of fair trade supply chains based on specific  
203 principles, and so on. Next, researchers, like many other actors, can express reservations as to  
204 the likelihood of such promises being realised. However, in so doing, they merely reassert the  
205 importance of such promises as references against which the schemes must be evaluated. So,  
206 for example, the conventionalisation of organic farming will be assessed as a function of the  
207 expected differences between organic and conventional farming.

208 There are two strands to the promise of difference that alternative food networks extend. The  
209 first strand concerns the promise of other ways of organising the production of, trade in, and  
210 /or consumption of food compared with those of the dominant conventional systems. The  
211 second strand concerns the tangible and intangible benefits of these changes. Gaëlle Balineau  
212 and Ivan Dufeu make a clear distinction between these two strands in the case of fair trade.  
213 The promise of difference offered by fair trade is not kept if the networks are organised  
214 similarly to conventional trade networks. However, it is also not kept if, despite a different  
215 organisation, the promised benefits in terms of the producers' development or environmental  
216 protection are not achieved (Balineau and Dufeu 2010).

217 This promise of difference is situated in what I call the project. Fair trade, short supply chains,  
218 and so on, benefit from being seen as alternative food networks. This is not because their  
219 practices truly break with conventional systems, but due to the promise of difference that their  
220 projects for the future offer. Oppositions such as fair trade v. conventional trade, organic  
221 farming v. conventional farming, slow food v. fast food, short supply chains v. long supply  
222 chains, artisanal production v. industrial production, chemistry v. nature, and so on should be  
223 taken serious. These oppositions must not be considered to be mere caricature-like short cuts.  
224 As elements of such projects they are vectors of change, and the turn-of-the-21st century  
225 publications presented above must consequently be reread from this perspective. Highlighting  
226 a “new rural development paradigm” (van der Ploeg et al. 2000) does not simply boil down to  
227 describing and analysing what exists. It also means moving towards desirable changes.

228 The second part of this article will describe the project as the reasons and ends that a  
229 collective gives itself to orient its action towards a desired future. However, before delving  
230 into this definition, I should like to stress how the collectives' projects are presented and  
231 observable in alternative food networks. Many alternative network initiatives give rise to  
232 relatively general documents that express the grand purposes and broad lines of their action  
233 (examples include the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement's (IFOAM)  
234 Principles of Organic Farming, the charter of the National Federation of Organic Farming in

235 France, etc.). The promotional materials that the actors use to present their approaches (press  
236 files, Internet sites, advertising, etc.) are also good ways to observe their projects. The  
237 promise of being different from “conventional trade” is asserted and omnipresent in the fair  
238 trade world and incarnated in a series of oppositions. Boosting the development of the “small  
239 farmers” who are the victims of the “big multinationals” of conventional trade; paying a fair  
240 price that allows for the farmer's situation rather than a market price set by the blind forces of  
241 supply and demand; establishing ties that are as direct as possible to prevent a series of  
242 middlemen getting rich at the farmers' expense; engaging in partnerships aimed at  
243 development rather than choosing suppliers based on a purely profit-seeking rationale; and  
244 acting as a “consum'actor” rather than passively taking in the messages of a consumer society  
245 are all promises of difference at the heart of the fair trade project.

246 One might retort that such messages are merely examples of skilful, more-or-less cynically  
247 distilled communication that should not be given undue importance. My lengthy experience  
248 with fair trade initiatives, but also with short supply chains and organic farming, prompts me  
249 to contest this argument. The highlighted oppositions must not be considered to be discourse  
250 aimed simply at putting the initiatives concerned in a better light. They are components of the  
251 collective projects underlying alternative food networks. These promises of difference are not  
252 empty promises, as attested by the fact that the actors themselves refer to them constantly in  
253 assessing their actions. For example, even though the principles laid down in the AMAP  
254 Charter (AMAPs being the French equivalent of North American community-supported  
255 agriculture (CSA) groups) are implemented in very wide variety of ways (Mundler 2007), the  
256 AMAPs' participants all refer to them to judge their practices. For example, they may rue the  
257 fact that their market gardener's cropping system is not very agroecological, but will accept it  
258 in light of another principle, that of helping a farmer to get through an economic rough patch  
259 and survive.

### 260 *1.3. Hybridisation and conventionalisation are relative to the projects*

261 Taking account of AFNs' projects and promises of difference makes it possible to back up the  
262 analysis of hybridisation and conventionalisation. Since we consider that these two  
263 phenomena relate to the alternative food network promoters' projects, the “alternative” and  
264 “conventional” categories to which they refer are no longer abstract or essentialised notions,  
265 and the criticism made on this point by researchers wishing to abandon this vocabulary is not  
266 valid anymore (Maxey 2007, Renting et al. 2012, DiVito Wilson 2013).

267 Speaking of “hybrid spaces” (Ilbery and Maye 2005) to describe alternative food networks  
268 speaks volumes, but is not sufficient for their analysis. So, once it has been ascertained that  
269 alternative food networks mix actors and rules that are in part “conventional” and in part  
270 “alternative”, it is also necessary to justify how the researcher establishes the boundary  
271 between the two sets. In working on various initiatives to relocalise the food supplies of  
272 collective catering (sourcing them locally again), I suggested tackling this question from the  
273 standpoint of the organisational innovation processes that were activated (Le Velly 2017). I  
274 call the rules aimed specifically at implementing the project's promise of difference  
275 “alternative rules”. These alternative rules differ from the pre-existing rules, some of which  
276 are replaced by the new rules and others of which remain in the new organisation. So, in the  
277 case of collective catering, implementing a project to source food supplies locally entails  
278 drawing up specific alternative rules. It will be necessary, for example, to forge new trade  
279 relations with farmers or distributors able to provide local produce, but also to change the  
280 quality of the produce ordered, menus and recipes, organisation of work in the kitchen,  
281 service given to the children in the school cafeterias, and so on (Le Velly 2017; see also  
282 Morgan and Sonnino 2008). Some existing conventional rules will be dropped as a result, but  
283 others will remain in effect (e.g., public procurement rules, hygiene standards, industrial  
284 equipment already on site, price levels set by prior negotiations with former suppliers, etc.)  
285 (Le Velly 2017; see also Klein 2015). Such an analysis backs up the idea of the hybridisation  
286 of alternative and conventional practices, but also strengthens the analysis by making the way  
287 the researcher establishes the divide between alternative and conventional rules more explicit  
288 (in the same vein, see, for a complex system of subscriptions to fish boxes: Le Velly and  
289 Dufeu 2016).

290 This reasoning applies as well to conventionalisation. Conventionalisation must also be seen  
291 in relation to the project. Several researchers into the conventionalisation of organic  
292 agriculture do indeed refer to the principles of IFOAM – the main international organic  
293 agriculture movement – to determine on which points and to what extent conventionalisation  
294 takes place (Padel et al. 2009, Darnhofer et al. 2010). This type of analysis can already raise  
295 the following question: Do these principles make sense to all the actors in the organic sector?  
296 It is already more convincing to refer, as Guthman did, to a list of principles set by the organic  
297 farmers in the surveyed region (Guthman 2004). Still, referring explicitly to IFOAM's  
298 principles already makes things more explicit than many of the research projects that assess  
299 conventionalisation according to criteria that do not refer to an explicit project. If the project

300 as a function of which conventionalisation is assessed is not made explicit, analysis tends to  
301 turn the alternative and conventional references used to assess practices into essentials. Under  
302 such conditions, it is possible to wonder, along with Angela Tregaer, whether the research that  
303 is most critical of conventionalisation refers more to the researchers' projects than to those of  
304 the actors concerned (Tregear 2011).

## 305 **2. Definition and properties of the notion of project**

306 The arguments broached in the first part of this article plead in favour of taking account of the  
307 project in analysing alternative food networks. To continue in this direction, it is now  
308 necessary to specify the properties that I associate with this notion. For this, I shall rely on the  
309 work of French sociologists involved in a more general questioning of “organised action”. I  
310 shall start by giving a definition of the project (Section 2.1.), and then clarify the respective  
311 contributions of projects and rules in constituting collective action as I see them (Section  
312 2.2.).

### 313 ***2.1. Definition of “project”***

314 In everyday French, the word “projet” echoes a wide range of different types of reality that  
315 are also expressed by terms such as plan, programme, intention, strategy, idea, etc. Most  
316 important, the notion of “project” as a “plan for the future” is not a well-established  
317 sociological concept. For example, it is not found in any of the major dictionaries of sociology  
318 published by Oxford, Cambridge, Routledge, Blackwell, and Sage. Introducing the notion of  
319 “project”, with its implications of creativity, vision, and purposiveness, into the analysis of  
320 alternative food networks thus requires starting by specifying the properties of this notion.

321 In French sociology, a substantial effort was made to do just that in the founding texts of  
322 Jean-Pierre Boutinet and Jean-Daniel Reynaud (Boutinet 1990, Reynaud 1997) and the more  
323 recent publications of Jean-Pierre Bréchet and his co-authors (Bréchet et al. 2009, Bréchet and  
324 Prouteau 2010). The latter defined the project as “a fuzzy operative expectation of a desired  
325 future” (Bréchet et al. 2009, p. 41). The project is an operative by means of which individuals  
326 imagine a future that they deem desirable and conceive of its broad characteristics. The  
327 project that is so defined can be individual or collective. It can be a personal project or a  
328 corporate plan. However, in the second case, one must add issues of coordination. To be able  
329 to act together, people must have common landmarks that give meaning and direction to the  
330 creation and evolution of the collective.

331 The definition used herein belongs to this vein of work. I see the project as the reasons and  
332 ends that a collective gives itself to orient its action towards a desired future. Let us consider  
333 this definition in three steps.

334 First, this definition puts the notion of project in the realm of the general questioning about  
335 the inception of collective action, for the “collective” in the definition can be a business,  
336 trades union, NGO, or any other organisation. However, it is interesting to go beyond this  
337 strictly “organisational” vision to include observable phenomena of more “market-related”  
338 collectives, such as supply chains and market places, in its scope. Such a broadening of the  
339 notion does not lack theoretical foundations. For the sociology of organised action, both  
340 organisations and markets are plagued by common coordination problems: It is necessary to  
341 distribute labour, set wages, determine desirable and unacceptable behaviours, agree on the  
342 principles of evaluating people and goods, etc., in both cases (Friedberg 1997). The  
343 perspective adopted is thus close to that of pragmatist sociology, a current developed in the  
344 economy of conventions in particular. To deal with the many coordination issues linked to  
345 carrying out collective action, be it in an organisation or on a market, the collective must be  
346 organised on the basis of shared landmarks (Thévenot 1984). Stated in the terms of actor-  
347 network theory (ANT), organisations and markets alike share the property of being “hybrid  
348 collectives”, “agencements” in which human and non-human actors (rules, laws, devices, etc.)  
349 act in concert (Callon and Law 1995, Çalışkan and Callon 2010). Reasoning in these terms is  
350 particularly relevant for working on alternative food networks. A CSA network, fair trade  
351 network, relocalised supply chains, slow food convivium, and so on are all initiatives that can  
352 be considered good examples of “collectives” informed by their actors' projects.<sup>i</sup>

353 Second, this definition of the project leads us to look closely at the “reasons and ends”, the  
354 simultaneously interpretive, cognitive, and normative frameworks underlying the inception of  
355 collective action. The fair trade project as expressed repeatedly in the various “charters” and  
356 “statements of principles” and promotional materials alike illustrates this point. It includes  
357 denouncing the malfunctions of “conventional trade” (low prices paid to farmers, poor  
358 working and living conditions, etc.), identifying the causes of this situation (greediness of  
359 trade intermediaries, speculation on agricultural commodities, etc.), asserting the aims of fair  
360 trade (making farmers autonomous, establishing a “fair price”, etc.), and identifying some  
361 major principles (guaranteeing a minimum price, creating long-lasting partnerships, etc.). This  
362 whole determines the meaning and direction of work. The project is the engine: The discourse  
363 that it generates justifies doing something, acting in favour of fair trade. Next, it is a reference

364 that orients action, a guide for establishing “alternative rules” that set the promise of  
365 difference in motion. Finally, it is a framework for assessment. As we shall see in the third  
366 part, the performance, be it good or bad, of fair trade networks is judged according to the ends  
367 that are stated in the project.

368 Third, writing that the project is turned toward conceiving of a more desirable future is aimed  
369 at thinking of the project as being relevant to a specific dimension of agency or mode of  
370 action. “What is agency?” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; see Bréchet and Prouteau 2010) is an  
371 article that must be read for its invaluable contributions in this regard. In it, Mustafa  
372 Emirbayer and Ann Mische identify three major dimensions of agency. They make a first  
373 distinction between the "iterative" and "practical evaluative" dimensions of agency, i.e.,  
374 routine versus reflective action. Then, referring in particular to the work of Hans Joas (Joas  
375 1996), they underline human beings' creativity, their abilities to imagine new states of the  
376 world and to launch their construction. They call this third dimension of agency “projective”.  
377 Each mode of action belongs to a different time frame: Whilst iterative agency takes the form  
378 of a reiteration of past actions and practical evaluative agency involves assessing current  
379 actions, projective agency marks the ability to imagine and to conceive broadly of other  
380 actions for the future. Recognising this third dimension of agency thus leads one to think of  
381 the collective's ability to initiate its own transformation through its projects for the future.  
382 According to Mische, the project is like a magic rope: Once the actors have thrown it in front  
383 of themselves, their project becomes the ladder of their own ascension (Mische 2009).

384 Such a notion of the project can contribute considerably to the study of “food utopias” such as  
385 researchers in rural sociology have recently embarked upon (Stock et al. 2015). Just as in  
386 these investigations, referring to the project allows one to study how the criticism levelled at  
387 conventional systems fuels experiments and processes of change. In addition, by emphasising  
388 the actors' creativity and possible transformations of food systems, such reference to the  
389 project shares with this vein of research a scientific stance that is deliberately a vector of hope  
390 (Carolan 2013, Forney 2016, Kristensen and Kjeldsen 2016; see also Gibson-Graham 2008).

## 391 *2.2. Projects and rules*

392 After this first effort to define the notion of a project, I shall continue to rely on the sociology  
393 of organised action to show how rules and projects are connected. Such clarification is  
394 necessary in order not to overestimate the place of the project in the scheme of things.

395 First it is necessary to point out that the creation of a collective involves both projects and  
396 rules. This point has been stressed most particularly in the sociology of organised action by  
397 Reynaud and sociologists following in his wake (Reynaud 1997, Reynaud 2003, Terssac and  
398 Lalande 2002, Segrestin 2004, Bréchet et al. 2009). Denis Segrestin, for example, stressed the  
399 importance of the “founding utopias”, of the “projects set by their actors” that were  
400 instrumental in the development of numerous organisational innovations in France in the  
401 1980s (innovations regarding quality management, outsourcing, partnerships, and so on). In  
402 his opinion, all these developments have to be understood as occurring at the intersection of  
403 changes in rules and changes in projects. For example, skills management was promoted and  
404 the rules governing salaried employment were revised in the name of a new way of  
405 considering the value of labour and the career. Such an approach prevents overestimating the  
406 centrality of rules and of projects alike: Without a project, rules have no meaning, but without  
407 rules, projects cannot be implemented. Projects and rules make interwoven contributions to  
408 the creation and development of collectives.

409 Next it is necessary to establish clearly that the projects do not determine the rules  
410 mechanically and the rules are not the direct application of the project. To underscore this  
411 point, the researchers defending the notion of the project usually point out that projects are  
412 “blurry”, “vague” references. Reynaud explains that the project must be understood not as  
413 “well-determined objectives and a plan to achieve them” but rather as “a social adventure  
414 with a horizon that remains vague” (Reynaud 2003, p. 112). Let us remember as well that  
415 Bréchet and his colleagues define the project as “a fuzzy operative expectation of a desired  
416 future” (Bréchet et al. 2009, p. 41). Similarly, Emirbayer and Mische explain that the project's  
417 sights are set on “an often vague and indeterminate future horizon” (Emirbayer and Mische  
418 1998, p. 989). Finally, whilst Segrestin sees himself as echoing the cultural frames that inspire  
419 organisational innovations, he is far from making them the only determinants of change. On  
420 the subject of management software packages, for example, he writes, “the tool is saturated  
421 with more or less antinomic utopias. It is thus in a weak state and forced to let its users choose  
422 between contrary causes whenever they come up” (Segrestin 2004, p. 316).

423 I concur with this position that projects are fuzzy references. Insisting on this is by no means  
424 an attempt to criticise them for a lack of robustness. That would be a classical type of  
425 reasoning in the sociology of organised action identical to the reasoning used with regard to  
426 the ambiguousness of the rules that apply (Crozier and Friedberg 1980): In the same way as  
427 the rules do not determine the action completely, but always leave some room for manoeuvre,

428 the project does not determine the rules completely. Consequently, setting the project in  
429 motion can only be the result of arbitration and negotiation.

### 430 **3. From the project to the rules: Two brief fair trade case studies**

431 To illustrate these theoretical developments, let us refer to two surveys carried out on two fair  
432 trade organisations, namely, the federation Artisans du Monde and Fairtrade International.  
433 Like other alternative food networks, fair trade has been described as a hybrid space, mixing  
434 alternative and conventional devices (Whatemore and Thorne 1997). Research also  
435 highlighted some conventionalisation trends and observed different levels of alternativeness  
436 amongst various fair trade organisations (Raynolds et al. 2007, Jaffee 2010). It is useful to  
437 identify the fair trade project clearly as the reference against which such judgements are  
438 made. This reference is present, more or less explicitly, in researchers' work, but it is also  
439 present in fair trade promoters' minds. In this third part, I shall show that the fair trade project  
440 is an important landmark for the establishment of fair trade rules. But, I shall also show that  
441 the project's fuzziness generates arbitration and negotiation. With the Artisans du Monde case  
442 we shall see how the rules that govern fair trade networks are the result of arbitrating amongst  
443 the various goals of the fair trade project (Section 3.1). The Fairtrade International case also  
444 heads in this direction, with a focus on one central rule, namely, setting a fair minimum price  
445 (Section 3.2.).

#### 446 *3.1. Artisans du Monde: Rules that result from arbitrating amongst the goals of the* 447 *project*

448 The federation Artisans du Monde carried out a survey in the first half of the 2000s to assess  
449 the impact of its action on the producers' organisations with which it had long-standing fair  
450 trade relations.<sup>ii</sup> A major result of this study was to highlight how diverse the supply chains  
451 established with these farmers/producers were. The federation's activists were informed of  
452 this result at national or regional general meetings, training sessions, new product range  
453 presentation days, and so on, and I attended quite a few of those events at the time. The  
454 federation's leaders emphasised the findings that might appear to be upsetting. It was thus  
455 interesting to see how the attending activists received these findings. These situations gave  
456 insights into how the activists referred to the fair trade project to assess the various supply  
457 chains that had been set up. Their feeling was that it was impossible to comply with all the



458 principles and aims of fair trade simultaneously. The rules that were established were the  
459 results of arbitrating amongst and ranking the various components of the project.

460 The ways that the various fair trade supply chains did or did not make it possible to work with  
461 highly marginalised producers were the crux of the discussions. Asserting the ability to  
462 provide outlets for organisations of “marginalised producers” that are unable to develop in  
463 conventional trade supply chains because of their members' disabilities or discriminations of  
464 all sorts is an important objective of the fair trade project. Yet, for all that, in practice this  
465 principle frequently comes up against two other principles of fair trade, to wit, (1) achieving  
466 autonomy for the producers through the market and (2) providing quality products. The  
467 project thus affirms the objectives of reinforcing the producers' organisations so that they do  
468 not depend on fair trade purchases and ensuring an egalitarian North/South partnership  
469 (“Trade, not charity”). When the findings of the study of their work's impact were shared with  
470 the base, the latter observed with regret that while the long-standing relations that had been  
471 established with highly marginalised groups of farmers and craftsmen had indeed improved  
472 these groups' daily lot, they had not generated any development processes. In particular, the  
473 marginalised producers had not become autonomous players, given the poor quality of their  
474 products and small sales volumes. On the other hand, the attending activists learnt, with just  
475 as much uneasiness, that the commercially most dynamic supply chains, those from which the  
476 network bought the largest amounts, involved organisations that had numerous outlets,  
477 including outside the realm of fair trade. In such cases, was it possible to continue speaking of  
478 “marginalised producers”? So, even though certain activists were personally more  
479 comfortable with one or the other of these two types of supply chain, none of them seemed  
480 completely happy with these findings. On the contrary, everyone saw quite clearly that the  
481 fair trade project was not fully achieved in either of the two cases.

482 If truth be told, certain supply chains seemed to have solved this problem. However, they  
483 managed to do so only by moving away from another aim of fair trade, that of establishing  
484 direct, personalised relations with the producers' organisations. An important conclusion of  
485 the study of Artisan du Monde's impact was that it was possible to work with marginalised  
486 producers whilst engaging autonomisation processes by means of the market. However, that  
487 entailed the intervention of development organisations and central export offices to support  
488 the producers' efforts to organise and to raise the quality of their produce or goods. This type  
489 of supply chain thus led to the establishment of relations involving a large number of  
490 intermediaries between the activists manning the points of sale and the “small

491 farmers/craftsmen”, to the point of making the latter invisible behind the development  
492 organisations that represented them (Ballet and Carimentrand 2010). What is more, it could  
493 also be marked by a strong tendency to adjust product design to meet Western consumers’  
494 tastes, even to the point of going against one last fair trade principle that is frequently asserted  
495 with regard to handicrafts, namely, respect for local know-how and cultural authenticity  
496 (Grimes and Milgram 2000).

497 The fair trade project is “fuzzy”, “vague”, and “ambiguous” (for comparable findings for a  
498 domestic fair trade project, see Feyereisen et al. 2017, and for food sovereignty, see Wald  
499 2015). Implementing it through specific rules entails arbitrating and establishing a hierarchy  
500 of its various components. In no way does showing this mean denying the importance of the  
501 project. All the arbitration that is done continues to be guided by the project. The mixed  
502 feelings of Artisans du Monde’s activists in respect of the impact study findings attest to that.  
503 Even if the project is not a perfect template for their collective action, it nonetheless is indeed  
504 a landmark, a source of intelligibility and structural guidance for it.

### 505 *3.2. Fairtrade International: setting a fair minimum price*

506 The fuzziness of the fair trade project is also important to determine in which interpretive and  
507 normative framework a central rule is established, that of setting the minimum prices at which  
508 Fairtrade International buys from producers. Whilst such minimum prices are not set in all fair  
509 trade supply chains, they are for most of the agricultural commodities certified by Fairtrade  
510 International, which is the principal global fair trade standards body.<sup>iii</sup>

511 Fairtrade International’s minimum price standards are updated periodically according to a  
512 specific procedure that goes from an official request by a stakeholder to the decision taken by  
513 the Standards Committee. Between these two points, Fairtrade International organises a public  
514 consultation, commissions studies, and drafts proposals for modifications. The Standards  
515 Committee then arbitrates amongst the various options. A Fairtrade International document  
516 sums up the principles that are supposed to guide the setting of these minimum prices as  
517 shown below. This text is remarkable in that it seems to say everything and its contrary!

518 The Fairtrade minimum price (FMP) is based on the principle of covering average costs  
519 of sustainable production of the products, while enabling the average producer to  
520 produce in an economic and financial [sic] sustainable way without systematic  
521 economic losses. This requires not only covering the average costs of sustainable  
522 production but also considering market acceptance to ensure that the FMP does not

523           compromise the ability to sell the product. The FMP is thus designed as a floor price  
524           which covers the average costs of sustainable production (which can be calculated by  
525           use of the sheet in Annex 1) of producers and at the same time allows these producers to  
526           have access to their product markets. This can imply that the FMP is fixed below the  
527           average costs of sustainable production. (Fairtrade International, Standard operating  
528           procedure development of Fairtrade minimum prices and premiums, January 2015)

529   In practice, the setting of a minimum price can indeed refer to one (“covering costs of  
530   sustainable production”) or the other (“considering market acceptance”) of these two  
531   rationales. In 2007, Juliane Reinecke spent six months observing the way the Standards  
532   Committee worked (Reinecke 2010). At the time of her investigation, this committee was  
533   composed of two representatives of producers organisations, two representatives of the  
534   importers, and two representatives of the network's “national initiatives”. The committee had  
535   to respond at the time to the request of the Latin American Confederation of Certified  
536   Producers<sup>iv</sup> to increase the minimum price of coffee. To back up their request, the South  
537   American coffee farmers produced detailed data on their rising costs and falling purchasing  
538   power. However, Reinecke explains, some of the Standards Committee members contested  
539   the relevance and objectiveness of the computations. It was also argued that a high price  
540   policy could help to keep economically inefficient producers organisations in the system.  
541   Finally, the risk of losing outlets was also put forward. In other words, imposing a high  
542   minimum price was seen as possibly generating sales prices that were too high for consumers  
543   but also carrying the risk of prompting some market operators to leave the Fairtrade network.  
544   These arguments prevailed, and the committee finally decided to raise the minimum price, but  
545   by a smaller amount than requested by the Latin American producers' confederation (Bacon  
546   2010).

547   Such negotiations within the bodies of Fairtrade International can obviously be interpreted as  
548   the expression of conflicts and balances of power amongst the various actors in the system  
549   (Renard 2005, Reynolds et al. 2007). Yet, for all that, these conflicts gain from being  
550   examined in detail in light of the ambiguousness of the fair trade project and the bargaining  
551   space that it allows. Increasing a minimum price to allow for the rising costs of sustainable  
552   production and not increasing it to allow for market restraints are two contrary positions that  
553   refer to the same project. Whilst the search for high prices is justified by the desire to support  
554   the efforts made by more ecological production systems and to improve the producers' living  
555   conditions, the possibility of setting prices below these same costs cannot be ruled out if the

556 end result is to generate sales and trigger more extensive development processes. The  
557 fuzziness of the fair trade project is precisely what enables the various parties to refer to one  
558 or the other of its dimensions to justify and develop its strategy.

## 559 **Conclusions**

560 This article argues in favour of introducing the notion of project in the analysis of alternative  
561 food networks. I believe that this notion fills a gap in existing research. It provides a solid  
562 foundation for the very use of the term “alternative”, to wit: Fair trade, short supply chains,  
563 organic agriculture, local produce, etc., deserve to be studied as “alternative” systems because  
564 these collectives are motivated by the promise of difference that their projects harbour.  
565 Working on the alternative/conventional hybridisations that make up alternative food  
566 networks then amounts to identifying the rules that are specifically established to set this  
567 promise of difference in motion, i.e., “alternative rules”, and to analyse how these alternative  
568 rules connect with the pre-existing conventional rules. Similarly, and still from this  
569 perspective, the degree of conventionalisation of an alternative network will be measured by  
570 the yardstick of the alternative ends that the project asserts rather than by referring to a  
571 general ideal of alternativeness.

572 After putting forward these arguments, I clarified the properties of the notion of project and  
573 proposed a definition that restores the importance of the cultural and cognitive frameworks  
574 that support the creation of collective action and recognises the agents' creative ability to  
575 imagine and to construct new states of the world. I also stressed the way the project and rules  
576 participate jointly in constituting the collective. I explained that the project must not be seen  
577 as a clear determinant of the rules but rather as a fuzzy landmark, a “vague horizon”. Setting  
578 the rules must not be mistaken for implementing the project directly, which results instead  
579 from the interpretation of and negotiations that take place around the project (.

580 Other contributions will be necessary to further our understanding of the role of the project in  
581 alternative food networks. In particular, field surveys are required to grasp better how their  
582 projects take shape. Several sub-questions on this point can be identified. Recognising human  
583 beings' ability to act projectively, as Emirbayer and Mische (1998) urge us to do, must not  
584 lead to losing sight of the actors' unequal abilities to envision new states of the world. The  
585 ability to contest existing rules in order to draw up new collectives is a sociological property  
586 that must be understood better. Which networks and knowledge are necessary to imagine new  
587 states of the world (Goodman et al. 2012)? How do the multiple socio-technical lock-ins that

588 constrain action prevent the emergence of projects that promise alternatives (Lamine et al.  
589 2012)? Finally, how are the projects affirmed in action, through experiments and learning  
590 processes in which projects and rules are constantly being redefined?

591 It is also necessary to improve our understanding of how the various scales of projects are  
592 embedded in each other. Concretely, fair trade and organic agriculture alike are subtended by  
593 a general project that is expressed in “charters” or “principles” by the collectives of  
594 organisations that operate on the international (World Fair Trade Organisations, International  
595 Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) or national (French Fair Trade Platform,  
596 National Federation of Organic Farming in the case of France) scale. However, whilst they  
597 identify with these general projects, organisations also assert their own fair trade or organic  
598 agriculture projects. This is, for instance, the case of the French fair trade federation  
599 Fédération Artisans du Monde and Norabio, an organic agriculture cooperative in the north of  
600 France. What is interesting in these two cases is that the overall project remains a reference  
601 that exerts a very strong attractive force, to the point that organisations with opposing  
602 strategies regarding, for example, selling through supermarkets continue to refer to the same  
603 ends and general principles. The mobilising force of the project does not require the  
604 individuals who identify with it to adopt it totally. Once again, thinking of the project as being  
605 fuzzy, and thus having the ability to unite actors whose aims are not identical, avoids the  
606 pitfall of an overly culturalist perspective.

607 Finally, it is also important to grasp how a general project can produce an economic sector  
608 such as fair trade or organic agriculture when the project itself is a vague or fuzzy reference.  
609 On the one hand, the fuzziness of fair trade and organic agriculture is a strength in that it  
610 allows the construction of economic sectors that include a great variety of actors and positions  
611 (Kjeldsen and Ingemann 2009, Rosin and Campbell 2009). But, on the other hand, it is also a  
612 weakness, in that the different interpretations of the project can lead to such divergent rules as  
613 to jeopardise the unity of the sector. By no means does including the project in the analysis  
614 overestimate its power in social processes. Its power as much as its weakness is precisely  
615 what must be explored.

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<sup>i</sup> There are differences between the sociology of organised action and ANT. Some debates have even pitted some of their leading authors against each other. Friedberg (1997) notably challenged the human-non-human symmetry specific to ANT. Latour (2005), for his part, argued that Friedberg's joint analysis of the strategies of actors and the rules of systems fails, like many others, to give an adequate understanding of the social. According to Latour, collective action is the property of heterogeneous actor-networks, while Friedberg emphasises the constitution of "local orders", i.e. stable interaction patterns. However, these differences

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should not hide strong convergences. The sociology of organised action and ANT share an endogenous explanation for the constitution of collective action (nothing is explained by exogenous forces) and recognition of the importance of rules and material devices.

<sup>ii</sup> In 2016, the federation *Artisans du Monde* was composed of 132 associations from all over France. The main activity of these associations is to man points of sale proposing food products and handicrafts that come exclusively from fair trade networks. To that end, rather than buying directly from producers' groups, they put in their orders with their central purchasing office, Solidar'Monde, and other operators. The local groups also conduct educational actions and do advocacy work with the help of the tools that the federation develops.

<sup>iii</sup> Fairtrade International was founded in 1997 by seventeen “national initiatives” (Fairtrade UK, Max Havelaar France, etc.) with the aim of coordinating their activities. In 2016 it federated twenty-five national initiatives and three certified producers’ organisations from Africa, Latin America, and Asia-Oceania. Its main action consists of drawing up and constantly revising the existing Fairtrade fair trade standards for some fifteen product families. Sales of products bearing the Fairtrade logo amounted to some 7.88 billion euros in 2016 (Fairtrade international, Annual report 2016-2017, 2017).

<sup>iv</sup> *Coordinadora Latinoamericana y del caribe de pequenos productores de comercio justo*