

Dynamics of Standardised Quality. Long-term shifts in organic product qualification

Nadine Arnold and Simon Dombrowski


Abstract

The qualities of standardised products are often perceived as naturally stable. This article scrutinises this perceived stability and investigates which aspects of standardised quality remain stable, and which change in the longer term. Our conceptual framework, anchored in the literature on standards and valuation studies, suggests that while standardised qualities appear to be stable over time and space, it is in these spatial and temporal dimensions of qualification that controversies and changes are expected. Empirically, we investigate the organic quality which has been maintained in the German mass market since the 1970s by the standard-setter Bioland. Searching our archival data for disruption that refers to events, which were interpreted by Bioland as reasons for adjusting the qualification, the data show that Bioland reacted swiftly to manifold disruption triggered by actors located along the production and distribution chain as well as outside it. Pooling Bioland's responses, we identify four shifts in terms of the (1) meaning, (2) focus, (3) organisation, and (4) relationships of quality. Due to these long-term shifts, little except the name of the standardised quality remained stable. Thus, the article concludes that standardised qualification must be dynamic and changeable if it is to be stably relevant in markets.

Keywords: standards; market; organisation; stability; diversity; archival research

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Introduction

For a standardised product to be exchanged in a market, it must go through a qualification process, at the end of which the product will have obtained its qualities (Callon et al. 2002; Beckert and Aspers 2011; Helgesson and Kjellberg 2013). Every day, countless standardised products, hardly exciting due to their seemingly stable qualities, are exchanged in markets across the world. This applies—but not exclusively—to food sold in supermarkets. For example, think of bananas, apples, flour, and pasta. Such products are qualified in a standard form, which means that their characteristics are presented in an analytic way that allows for mass production and long-distance trade (Boltanski and Esquerre 2020). By the time a standardised product is exchanged in a market, its qualities appear unambiguous and uncontested (Bessy and Chauvin 2013). The reason for this is that standardised products' qualification, which involves classification (assessing the broader category of the product and what it is) and evaluation (considering how good or bad the specimen is) (Kuipers and Franssen 2020), precedes the products' exchange in the market (Eymard-Duvernay 1989; Musselin and Paradeise 2005; Beckert and Musselin 2013; Arnold and Hasse 2016). Looking at the actual act of exchange in the market, one gets the impression that standards stabilise the quality of products. This general impression has been substantiated by studies that distinguish standardised, reproducible qualities from singular and exceptional ones (Karpik 2010; Boltanski and Esquerre 2020) or explain that standard forms can achieve an “exceptional stability and universality” (Thévenot 1984: 11).

In contrast, the literature on standards emphasises the dynamics of standards and standardisation (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000; Timmermans and Epstein 2010; Higgins and Larner 2010; Busch 2011; Brunsson et al. 2012; Loconto and Demortain 2017). Under the thesis that we live in “a world of standards but not a standard world” (Timmermans and Epstein 2010: 69), scholars highlight the proliferating multiplicity of standards (Djelic and den Hond 2013; Arnold and Loconto 2021), the use of standards to create differentiation and diversity (Busch 2011; Loconto and Demortain 2017), or the manifold tensions in the setting and following of standards (e.g. Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000; Higgins and Larner 2010). In this context, Brunsson et al. (2012: 627) highlight that “while standards might aim at the creation of stability and sameness, standardisation itself is a highly dynamic phenomenon”. From here, this article aims to shed light on the dynamics of a long-term standardised product qualification process by asking which aspects of standardised quality remain stable, and which change in the longer term.

The impression that standardised qualities are stable is based on the fact that standardisation is closely linked to organisation (Bowker and

Star 1999: 37; Brunsson et al. 2012, Gustafsson 2020). The term organisation can be understood to refer to two phenomena. First, it refers to the formal standardisation organisations that take decisions relevant to qualification (e.g. International Organisation of Standardisation (ISO), Fairtrade International, safety agencies). We call these formal organisations standard-setters. Second, organisation refers to the standards and other organisational elements (e.g. controls, sanctions, rankings) decided upon to influence the development and maintenance of quality (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011, 2019). Both organisational standard-setters and elements can be considered market intermediaries, as they are not usually part of either the supply or demand side of the market but help to reduce the uncertainty of market exchanges by defining the relationships between buyers and sellers (Eymard-Duvernay 1989; Musselin and Paradeise 2005; Beckert and Musselin 2013; Bessy and Chauvin 2013; Ahrne et al. 2015). In doing so, they establish relationships of trust between producers and consumers and play a pivotal role in the successful qualification of market objects (Varga 2019; Wilde 2020).

While standardised product qualities maintained by formal standard-setters appear to be stable over time and space, our conceptual framework, anchored in the literature on standards and valuation studies, will suggest that it is in these spatial and temporal dimensions of qualification that tensions and changes are expected. Empirically, we investigate organic quality, a standardised product quality that has been introduced and adapted in the German mass market since the 1970s, among others, by the standard-setter Bioland. The advanced age of this specific quality will bring us the unique opportunity to examine and identify long-term shifts in a standardised qualification that concerns not only the meaning and focus of the qualification but also its organisation and the relationships behind it. These empirical findings will allow us to argue that lively dynamics are a prerequisite for maintaining quality in an ostensibly stable manner.

In the remainder of this article, we first develop our conceptual framework for studying dynamics in standardised qualification. Then, we introduce our empirical case study and provide information about our methodology. Thereafter we present our empirical findings, identify a broad variety of actors who disrupted the qualification, and describe how Bioland responded to qualification disruption while maintaining its product quality. We discuss our findings in the fourth section by identifying four major shifts that allowed organic quality to be maintained in a growing space and to endure over time. We conclude with a brief reflection on what it means when standardised quality goes hand in hand with dynamic processes.

Standardised qualification: Temporal and spatial processes between stability and diversity

Qualification is a process that should gain stability through the use of standards because that is standardisation's aims (Timmermans and Epstein 2010: 84). Given that the notion of stability refers to the idea that something has the "strength to stand and endure,"¹ a stable qualification is perceived as one that neither differs depending on the setting nor changes over time. This understanding manifests when we approach standards as investments in form, following Thévenot (1984).² He argued that investments in form vary in stability and universality depending on their lifespan and area of validity. While the latter (area of validity) depends on where a certain investment is applied, a long lifespan gives "the right to reproduce a particular form [...] over a certain period of time" (Thévenot 1984: 11). In addition to patents and government regulations, standards are an illustrative example of a form-giving investment with a long life and a high degree of validity (Thévenot 2015). This means that standards are expected to stabilise in space and time; but paradoxically, it is precisely in these dimensions (spatial and temporal) that the triggers for change must be suspected. Let us interrogate both dimensions, one after the other.

Spatial dimension

The spatial dimension of product qualification refers to the space in which, at a given point in time, actors bring different definitions of quality and bargain over them (Musselin and Paradeise 2005). The actors who define the qualification space are, of course, the buyers and sellers who exchange the focal product in a specific locale. This becomes clear, for example, in Garcia-Parpet's (2007) description of the strawberry auction in Fontaines-en-Sologne. At the auction, sellers display the strawberries for sale to buyers in the auction hall. When determining the price during the auction process, market participants are physically present. This seems to be a commonplace procedure for standardised products, and Dobeson and Kohl (2020: 45) write that standardised non-durable products "are usually evaluated and traded 'on the spot' [...] between multiple buyers and sellers." However, the qualification space for standardised products is not limited to places of

¹ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "stability," accessed 22 April 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stability>.

² Thévenot's work also indicates that stabilising attempts of standardisation are closely linked to organisational phenomena. Close reading reveals that Thévenot's (1984) conceptualised investments in forms is based on a reinterpretation of Taylor's seminal *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911 [2016]), which are known to unfold in and from organisational contexts. In other words, investment in form typically results from organisational effort.

exchange between buyers and sellers (e.g. auction halls and consumer markets). The exchange of things is only one stage in their lives (Appadurai 1986), and qualification “occurs across social contexts, and certainly not exclusively in economic settings” (Kuipers and Franssen 2020: 144).

Indeed, Garcia-Parpet (2007) shows that actors other than those who exchange strawberries influence strawberries’ qualification. For example, the *Comite Economique du Val de Loire* (a formal standard-setter) shapes the qualification process via its quality criteria. In fact, due to the involvement of actors other than sellers and buyers, the strawberries’ qualification process is distributed among many locations and instances (e.g. the auction hall, sessions of the economic committee that set quality criteria, and laboratories of the seed manufactures). Therefore, qualification processes are shaped not just by the criteria applied by people in a single social space (Boltanski and Thévenot 1983); rather, multiple actors from various spaces are involved in the qualification process. Supporting this position, Callon et al. (2002) claimed that products are qualified in “hybrid forums” of experts from different disciplines (e.g. economics, law, food science, media, and consumer protection) who are not necessarily visible during the actual market exchange. In the case of standardised qualities, the actors who set and enforce the standards play a particularly relevant role.

It is this diversity of actors that whirls up qualification, provoking shifts and dynamics. This is also true in the case of standardised qualification, as Loconto and Demortain (2017) argue. They put the thesis forward that standardisation is the result of a dynamic interaction of three spaces in which standards are made, followed, and circulate. This means, first, diversity emerges when actors decide about standards in conflict-and power-laden processes, which typically take place within formal standard-setters (e.g. Hallström and Boström 2010). Second, diversity results when actors follow and translate standards in locally contingent ways (e.g. Higgins and Larner 2010; Arnold and Loconto 2021), or third, when standards circulate between competing standard-setters and other relevant third parties, such as government agencies, social movements, or control authorities (e.g. Busch 2011; Gustafsson 2020; Arnold 2022). Consequently, standards do indeed attempt to stabilise in different spatial arenas and can achieve a high degree of diffusion, but it is this diffusion that makes standardisation dynamic.

Temporal dimension

By the term temporal, we refer to the long-term dimension of qualification, while others, when interrogating the temporal dimension of qualification and valuation, typically focus on “moments of valuation” (Antal et al. 2015). In these temporally restricted moments,

products are requalified due to different orders of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), competitors seek to detach consumers from competing products (Callon et al. 2002), and/or buyers mobilise different judgement devices for evaluating products (Karpik 2010). Examining such moments is useful for understanding the qualification of things with uncertain qualities, such as singular goods (Karpik 2010) or counterfeits (Bessy and Chateauraynaud 2014). In the case of standardised products, however, quality appears momentarily stable, whereas we can expect dynamics in the longer term. When referring to long-term product qualities, we do not refer to the individual product's material durability. Other researchers have dealt with the distinction between durable and non-durable products (Dobeson and Kohl 2020). Rather, we mean that a specific quality is attributed to many different products over several years, or even decades.

Standards are a key tool for attributing and evaluating qualities in a stable way over a long period, but this longevity is also a cause of change. While long-term developments in qualification have received little scholarly attention (Musselin and Paradeise 2005: 26–32), we know that time is a risk of standardising (Bowker and Star 1999: 193). In this vein, Timmermans and Epstein wrote that “standards can stabilise some action in a moving world, but when the world around the standards changes, the standard quickly becomes outdated or altered” (Timmermans and Epstein 2010: 84). To keep up with societal changes, standards that underpin the qualification process transform with a tendency to accumulate, and they are complemented by other organisational elements (e.g. controls and sanctions) to legitimise and enforce adoption of the standards (e.g. Loconto 2017; Gustafsson 2020; Arnold 2022).

Over time, however, it is not only the organisation of standardised quality that may change; it is equally possible that the quality itself may change. For example, for a long time, fair trade quality coffee stood for solidarity and an inferior, bitter taste, while today fair trade is also associated with exquisite roast aroma and flavour (Arnold 2017). Interestingly, Boltanski and Esquerre (2020) claim that the meaning of quality itself has changed. Following them, quality nowadays refers to something exceptional and special, whereas quality used to mean primarily something that is standardised and uniform. However, just as the meaning of quality or a specific quality can transform when detached from concrete objects, the quality of certain durable things can also shift. An illustrative example is rubbish. In this case, the value of an object declines until it is classified as rubbish, but this rubbish can then regain value through the attribution of new qualities, such as antiquity (Thompson 1979).

In sum, we know that standardised product qualification is destabilised by the actors involved in the making, following, and circulating of standards. If these disruptions are responded to in a

quality-assuring way, long-term shifts of the qualification process and its quality are to be expected.

Case and method

Organic food qualification led by Bioland

Food is well suited for examining standardised product qualities. While economic sociologists have been intrigued by the study of singular foods whose qualification is controversial and highly ambiguous, such as foie gras (DeSoucey 2018) or wine (Garcia-Parpet 2011), most of the everyday food that we consume is highly standardised (Busch 2011). Over the last few decades, these rather mundane everyday food products (e.g. potatoes, apples, sausages) that are sold in ordinary supermarkets have been increasingly attributed to new qualities, such as being CO₂-free, dolphin-safe, organic, fair trade, GMO-free, or environment-friendly. Rural sociologists have used the notion of “quality turn” to summarise this trend, referring to the shift from production-based qualities to qualities that emphasise nature and local embeddedness (Allaire and Sylvander 1997; Murdoch et al. 2000).

The specific quality that we are dealing with is organic quality, which has been attributed to a growing number of agricultural products for many years and has become the most well-known and most studied food quality (FAO 2014). Germany is one of the countries where the organic qualification process started early, after the organic–dynamic movement started advocating for more self-sustaining agricultural production methods in the 1920s (Conford 2001). Seeing that this movement has resulted in many formal standard-setters specialising in organic qualification (Biokreis e. V., Biopark e. V., Bio-Initiative GmbH, Bioland, Demeter e. V., Ecoland e. V., Ecovin e. V., Gäa e. V., Verbund Ökohöfe e. V., Naurland e. V.), Germany exemplifies the fact that the construction of standardised product qualities is fundamentally linked to the creation of organisations (Brunsson et al. 2012).

We chose to investigate Bioland’s qualification process because it is particularly extended in terms of space and time. Before describing this extension in more detail, we would like to note that Bioland is a non-profit organisation that can be characterised as a hybrid between a commercial and critical intermediary (Karpik 2010: 100–101). As a critical intermediary, it is an association of organic food producers that does not engage in the exchange of organic products. Simultaneously, it is a commercial intermediary because its members, who represent half of the organised organic farmers in Germany, produce, and sell

organic food.³ Given that the producers of organic Bioland foods are also members of Bioland, we will refer to them as producer-members.

The qualification space in which Bioland operates is extensive, and Bioland is the largest organic food standard-setter in Germany in terms of producer-members (8.154) and cultivated area (475.068 ha).⁴ Consequently, the Bioland label is widely recognised by more than half the German population.⁵ In addition to this spatial spread, Bioland was a good match for our research purposes because it was founded in 1971 and has successfully maintained its organic qualification for 50 years. During this period, the meaning of organic quality changed significantly. We will now briefly describe Bioland's qualification set-up and what it stands for today.

Bioland's organic food quality emerged in the 1970s, when farmers from southern Germany adopted the concept of "organic farming" from Swiss farmers. At that time, the scope of this quality was particularly narrow and focused on small-scale local production chains. Only a few family farms in southern Germany specialising in grain harvesting and dairy farming practised organic culture. The producers who formed Bioland defined organic quality using the following six principles:

life creates life;
improve health;
reduce costs;
increase performance;
do everything that promotes soil fertility; omit everything that
destroys soil fertility;
do not buy soil fertility, but build it yourself.
(Authors' translation)⁶

The principles show that the idea of organic farming was originally meant to reduce agricultural production costs (i.e. the cost of chemical fertilisers and plant-protection agents) by naturally fostering soil fertility. Farms were conceptualised as circular economies that maintained soil fertility using the manure produced by livestock, while animals, in turn, were to be fed with the harvest from the fields. The

³ Bund Ökologische Lebensmittelwirtschaft e.V. 2021. *Branchenreport 2021. Ökologische Lebensmittelwirtschaft*. Berlin.

⁴ Bund Ökologische Lebensmittelwirtschaft e.V. 2021. *Branchenreport 2021. Ökologische Lebensmittelwirtschaft*. Berlin.

⁵ Max Rubner Institut 2008. *Nationale Verzehrstudie II. Ergebnisbericht, Teil 1*. Karlsruhe.

⁶ Siegfried Kuhlendahl 1996. "Auf dem Weg zum organisch-biologischen Landbau," *Bio-land* (1): 10–12.

resulting lower yield was to be offset by price premiums, which were justified by the fact that organic products were healthier and free of pesticides. Dairy, meat, and processed products (e.g. cheese, cookies, yoghurt, French fries) were not qualified by Bioland, and animal welfare has not yet been taken into account. Furthermore, qualified products were sold at farmers' markets or in local alternative food stores, while government regulations concerning organic agriculture did not yet exist.

Today, 50 years later, the description of Bioland's organic quality is different, and Bioland's modified principles now focus on animal welfare, the production of nutritious food, and environmental protection:

- operating farms using a circular production process;
- promoting soil fertility;
- keeping animals in a humane way;
- producing valuable food;
- promoting biological diversity;
- preserving natural resources;
- securing a future worth living for people.

(Authors' translation)⁷

These principles are followed by many farms and horticultural organisations, while almost all German harvested foods and a broad variety of processed foods are qualified as organic by Bioland. Moreover, Bioland products are sold from various outlets, ranging from alternative farmers' markets to mass discounters. Finally, following the increasing popularity of organic product qualities, governments around the world have introduced regulations for organic production. In Germany, EU directives regulate the use of labels such as "organic," "bio," or "biological," meaning that only foods from certified farmers and food manufacturers can obtain these labels. However, it is important to note that Bioland's principles go beyond EU regulations in some cases, especially in the area of animal welfare.

Data collection and analysis

To explore which aspects of standardised organic quality have remained stable and which have changed in the longer term, we collected rich archival data produced by and about the case organisation (Bioland) (Ventresca and Mohr 2002). Table 1 provides an overview of these data. We read the journals (*bio gemüse Rundbrief* and *bio-land*) published by Bioland from 1974 to 2012, which were especially valuable for our study because, in addition to reporting on

⁷ Bioland, Die sieben Prinzipien. <https://www.bioland.de/sieben-prinzipien>, accessed 22 April 2021.

current news, best practice, and agricultural research results, they systematically included documents such as annual reports and reports on Bioland's biannual general meetings. Journals published by competing organic standard-setters provided information about Bioland's qualification process from an outside perspective. These journals included ones by Biokreis e.V. (*Bio-Nachrichten*), Demeter e.V. (*Lebendige Erde* and *Demeter-Blätter*), and Naturland e.V. (*Naturland Magazin* and *Naturland Nachrichten*) Finally, we also read the newsletter of the umbrella organisation of German organic standard-setters published by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft ökologischer Landbau e.V. (AGÖL-Info) and two independent journals for scientists, activists, and practitioners concerned with organic farming (*IFOAM-Bulletin* and *Ökologie & Landbau*) published by the foundation Stiftung Ökologie & Landbau. Given that both insider and outsider journals were published periodically throughout our chosen research period, we had access to comprehensive insights from multiple perspectives, which enabled validation.

Description	Publisher	Official journal title (in German)	Time period	Number of pages read
Journals published by the focal standard-setter	Bioland e. V.	<i>bio gemüse Rundbrief</i> , from 1980 onwards <i>bio-land</i>	1974–2012	approx. 9,500
Journals published by competing standard-setter	Biokreis e. V.	<i>Bio-Nachrichten</i>	1983–2012	approx. 2,000
	Demeter e. V.	<i>Lebendige Erde</i> <i>Demeter-Blätter</i>	1946–2012 1962–1995	approx. 4,000
	Naturland e. V.	<i>Naturland Magazin</i> , from 2003 onwards <i>Naturland Nachrichten</i>	1994–2012	approx. 3,200
Journal published by the umbrella organisation of German organic standard-setters	Arbeitsgemeinschaft ökologischer Landbau e. V.	<i>AGÖL-Info</i>	1995–2000	approx. 100
Independent journal concerned with organic farming in Germany	Stiftung Ökologie & Landbau	<i>IFOAM-Bulletin</i> (1977–1988) <i>Ökologie & Landbau</i>	1977–2002	approx. 6,300
Total pages read				approx. 25,200

Table 1. Overview of Data Collection.

Source: Adapted by permission from Springer Nature Customer Service Center GmbH: Springer, *Qualitätsdarstellungen und ihre Störungen* by Dombrowski and Arnold 2021.

By triangulating these data, we first reconstructed Bioland's historical development since the emergence of organic product quality in Germany in 1971, developing a detailed narrative (Dombrowski 2019). The narrative laid the groundwork for further analysis aimed at identifying shifts in the qualification process and their causes. To explore shifts in Bioland's standardised quality, we relied on the insight that the qualification process can best be observed in dynamic situations in which actors contest the meaning of a quality or are

otherwise engaged in adapting, extending, or altering its meaning (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Helgesson and Kjellberg 2013; Bessy and Chateauraynaud 2014; Antal et al. 2015). Following this insight, we searched our data for quality-related disruption that refers to events, which were interpreted by Bioland as reasons for adjusting the qualification. This means that Bioland has always reacted in case of a disruption and taken measures to counter it. We did not consider disruptive events that were ignored by Bioland.

Using this approach, we identified ten major events in our narrative in which the qualification was disrupted, and as a result, Bioland decided to take active measures to address the disruption. Our analysis of the disruption was theoretically pre-informed (Baur 2009) because we assumed that the stability and dynamics of qualification were best examined with a focus on its spatial and temporal dimensions. Thus, after specifying the subject of disruption, we used our data to determine its origin and trigger. Specifically, we examined our data to specify the actors that disrupted the quality and its underlying process. In doing so, we caught a broad variety of actors who endangered quality and its underlying process, noting that disruption varied spatially. While much disruption originated with actors who were involved in the supply and distribution chain by buying and selling products, other disruption stemmed from actors who influenced the qualification process without exchanging products (e.g. social movement, media, and policymakers). As you will read further on, we use this distinction to systematically present our empirical results. However, once we had identified the actors and were as familiar as possible with our data, we examined in detail how Bioland responded to disruption in order to ward it off and maintain quality. By pooling these responses, we could identify long-term shifts in the organic qualification process that were necessary for organic quality to be maintained over time.

Dynamics of Bioland's organic quality, 1970–2012

We highlight the disruptions that were most discussed in the journals without presenting them chronologically. This means we first deal with the start of the qualification process, which began with the creation of Bioland. Then, we direct our attention to disruption triggered by actors in the production and distribution chains. For each disruption, we highlight the disruptive actors in advance, which were producer-members, food manufacturers, and supermarkets. Afterwards, we focus on disruption that stemmed from the actors who disturbed the qualification process without exchanging products, such as social movements, research institutes and policymakers, media, and competing standard-setters.

Initiating the qualification

In West Germany, the number of farms halved from 1.6 million in 1949 to 662,000 in 1986, while the average area under cultivation per farm more than doubled from 8 ha in 1949 to 18 ha in 1986 (Henning 1988). In the course of this transformation, German farmers aimed at specialised and efficient production, increasingly relying on costly inputs (e.g. farm machinery, chemically produced fertilisers, pesticides) to improve yields and animal production (Uekötter 2012).

In contrast, the producer-members who founded Bioland in 1971 ran small, unspecialised farms engaged in crop farming and dairy farming and could not compete economically with larger, specialised, and more efficient operations due to a lack of resources for costly inputs. The founding producer-members adopted and further developed the idea of organic farming, which was originally invented by Swiss farmers. The similarity between German and Swiss farms and the geographical proximity of the two countries facilitated the adoption and diffusion of organic quality, which merged the following two ideas: (1) protecting farmers' independence from the agrochemical industry and the state; and (2) adopting a business concept based on reducing production costs (by using agricultural techniques that do not need costly inputs) and selling grains and vegetables at an organic price premium. In practice, Bioland bundled its members' supply, which mostly consisted of grain, to sell it in larger quantities to grain mills and larger bakeries, while milk was sold conventionally to dairies without price premiums.

The foundation of the formal organisation, Bioland, was meant to fight structural changes in agriculture and promote organic agriculture in Germany, initiating the organic qualification process. At this time, Bioland primarily oriented itself to its producer-members. Until 1985, there were few formalised standards for defining the techniques that constituted Bioland quality, but producer-members were trained through workshops, regional groups, and publications on organic agriculture. Interestingly, Bioland's focus was on organic farming as a method of cost reduction rather than something that resulted in health benefits and enabled the sale of premium quality products to consumers, with the lack of residue from chemical fertilisers and pesticides highlighted as the main component of quality. The spatial reach of organic quality was quite narrow, as it was restricted to a limited number of small farms engaged in dairy and crop farming in southern Germany. The limited size of the qualification space was also reflected on the sales side, as producer-members sold their harvest directly at local farmers' markets and later founded specialised food stores. For consumers, the products were qualified by knowledgeable farmers and store clerks acting as "personal judgement devices" (Karpik 2010). At this early stage, products hardly ever had a standard

form, and Bioland mainly invested in relationships, which is why organically qualified products had not yet reached the masses.

Disruptions triggered by actors in production and distribution chains

Producer-members. As Figure 1 shows, the popularity of Bioland's product quality grew tremendously among agricultural producers between 1978 and 2012. This membership growth disturbed the qualification in two ways. First, the growing number of producer-members implied a growing variety of farms, thus challenging the idea of the kinds of farms that were allowed to participate in the organic qualification process. By applying for membership, new producers whose farms did not structurally resemble those of the founding producer-members (due to higher levels of specialisation or cultivation of larger areas) challenged the qualification. In 1985, to respond to new applications, Bioland set new standards for defining the kinds of producers that were eligible (or not) for membership. In a speech introducing the new standard, the Bioland managing director at the time stated the following:

They [the new rules prescribed in the standard] make clear what environmentally sustainable contemporary agriculture looks like, and they make it clear that this method cannot be bent to the needs of every farm, no matter how "structurally degraded" it may be. (Speech by Bioland managing director, 1985, authors' translation)⁸

More specifically, Bioland introduced new rules that made membership impossible for highly specialised factory farms, which hindered the latter from establishing collaborative relationships with Bioland and its product quality.

⁸ P. Grosch. 1986. "Entwicklungsbericht Bundesversammlung 1986," *Bio-land* (2): 3.

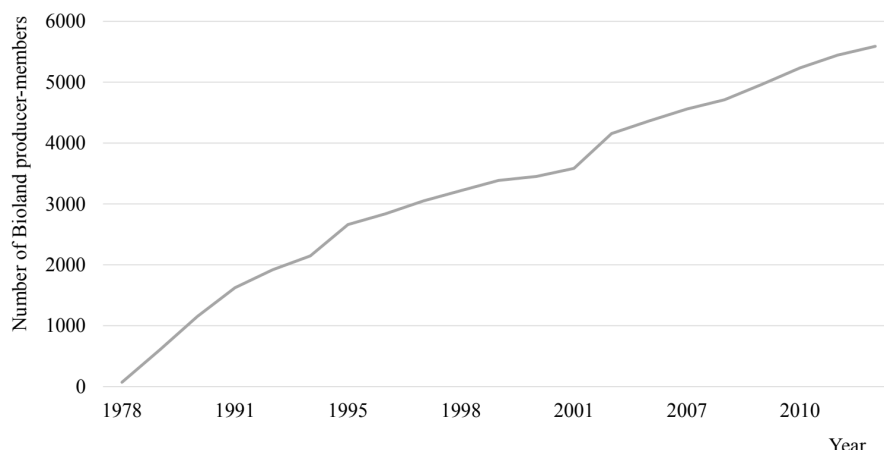


Figure 1. Bioland's membership development figures 1978-2012.

Source: Authors' own data collected from membership figures in various issues of the journals listed in Table 1 and the annual statistics of the Bundesverband Oekologische Landwirtschaft.

Second, growing membership was accompanied by demands to extend the organic quality and its underlying process to new products, which caused far-reaching disruption – for example, in cases of gardening and beekeeping. Unlike for harvesting grains, Bioland had not established criteria for gardening or producing honey organically. In the case of gardening, the horticultural operations that disrupted the qualification were run by producer-members. Given that they rarely engaged in animal husbandry, horticultural farms could not produce the manure necessary for fertilising their patches and needed to buy fertilisers from external sources. By doing so, they were not conforming to the main principle of Bioland farming, namely circular farming. Moreover, they used plastic foil to protect plants and heat greenhouses, which was not compatible with Bioland's ideal of environmentally friendly production. Therefore, to enable the qualification of products from horticultural farms, Bioland created a new intra-organisational division, a standard development commission, to adapt Bioland's quality ideals to horticulture. The commission, composed of gardeners and Bioland's staff, defined which practices constituted gardening according to Bioland principles. For example, horticultural farms were allowed to buy fertiliser only if they paid special attention to the quality of the manure (avoiding manure from factory farms), recycled plastic foil, and only achieved a moderate extension of the cultivation time through heating.⁹

In the case of honey production, the qualification was disrupted by beekeepers. They could not completely avoid chemical fertilisers and

⁹ Bio-land. 1988. "Bioland-Erzeugungsrichtlinien. Bestimmungen für den Gemüsebau," *Bio-land* (1): 35–36.

pesticides (as required by Bioland) because bees collected pollen from fields on adjacent farmlands that could have been treated using both. Therefore, the honey could not be qualified as organic, which is why Bioland's beekeepers started debating what Bioland's organic beekeeping should entail. Finally, at Bioland's general assembly, they proposed an annexe to the Bioland standard that prohibited the treatment of beehives with specific chemical preservatives and defined the practices of natural beekeeping that emphasised animal welfare as a major component.¹⁰ Overall, Bioland reacted to disruption triggered by producer-members by forming new intra-organisational divisions and setting new rules, which stabilised and expanded the qualification space at different points in time. Similar developments took place regarding viticulture and pig farming, and we will see that setting rules and creating organisational divisions were important changes for maintaining standardised product quality.

Producer-members and food manufacturers. Besides demands by food manufacturers, the growing number and variety of producer-members led to other disruption. Beginning in the late 1980s, dairy farmers who could not rely on direct sales demanded new marketing opportunities for processed products to attain additional sales channels, expecting an increase in the price of organic milk. At the same time, food manufacturers wanted to expand their organic qualification to new products, such as fruit yoghurt, liquors, or wheat rolls. However, as Bioland defined its product quality as healthy and natural, it was a highly contested question within the standard-setter whether products that required extensive industrial manipulation (e.g. white flour, white sugar) could be qualified as organic by Bioland. A board member described the controversy as follows:

Dairy farmers are demanding that UHT [ultra-high-temperature processing] milk should be approved, while others are threatening to leave the organisation if this is done. There are similar discussions for almost every product. (Statement, board member, Bioland, 1991, authors' translation)¹¹

After intense internal conflict, Bioland opted to link its product quality to the well-established concept of whole food nutrition, which claimed that food is healthier if it is less processed (Koerber 2012). Producer-members advocating for formal expansion of the qualification space to include whole food products received external support. More specifically, the association of whole food manufacturers and

¹⁰ R. Geist. 1991. "Bioland-Bienenhaltung," *Bio-land* (2): 36–37; U. Schumacher 1993. "Bioland muss ein Zeichen setzen," *Bio-land* (1): 39–41.

¹¹ Christoph Ziechaus-Hartelt. 1991. "Bioland – Ein Verband entwickelt sich," *Bio-land* (2), 13–14.

distributors claimed an expansion, as they aimed to differentiate their offerings by qualifying them as healthier than other organic products sold in supermarkets. Accordingly, highly processed ingredients and products (e.g. white sugar, UHT milk) were not allowed according to Bioland's rules; however, besides raw agricultural products, Bioland's qualification included products processed according to the concept of whole-food nutrition. By adopting the concept of whole-food nutrition, Bioland could contribute to stabilising its product quality while extending its qualification to processed food.

Producer-members and supermarkets. Producer-members disrupted the qualification not only in terms of who may produce organically, and which products may be qualified as organic (as discussion of previous disruption has shown), but also in terms of where qualified products could be sold. Our data showed that supermarkets played an important role in this case, although initially the disruption was triggered by producer-members from remote areas.

Originally, qualification relied on personal judgement devices, such as the trustworthiness and knowledge of producer-members at local markets and farm stores. Given that this qualification was not financially viable for the producer-members in remote regions, Bioland sought to develop marketing structures that would be more beneficial to its producer-members. More specifically, Bioland wanted to develop impersonal, generalised judgement devices that could extend the qualification to more anonymous retail locations (supermarkets) by informing consumers remotely about organic quality. To accomplish this, Bioland developed a label (a visual symbol that signified compliance with Bioland standards), and in so doing mobilised a tool that, while responding to producer-members' wishes, built new relationships with supermarkets, where products are primarily qualified by their packaging and display on the shelves (Cochoy 2007). Given that German supermarkets had been developing their own organic brands (visual symbols that were not linked to compliance with independent standards) since the early 1980s, the foods qualified by Bioland were displayed next to supermarkets' "pseudo-organic" products. Some of these pseudo-organic products had astonishingly similar labels – for example, in one extreme case, products bore the label BIOLAN (compared with the word Bioland, only the letter "d" was missing). In court, Bioland's actions against this imitation were unsuccessful.

Consequently, expansion of Bioland's qualification space for supermarkets resulted in another disruption, namely, competition, and confusion with pseudo-organic products. Given supermarkets' power in food chains and the definition of quality standards (Ponte and Gibbon 2005), maintaining organic quality was challenging for Bioland at this time. At first, Bioland intended to supply only those

supermarkets that were willing to undertake additional qualification action, such as special training for shop clerks and marketing coordination with Bioland. However, few supermarkets accepted these conditions, which is why Bioland attempted to ensure the organic quality of its products by restricting sales to selected supermarket chains regarded as premium food retailers, such as the Edeka cooperative. Consequently, Bioland invested in the appearance of its label, one that did not require the support of or collaboration with supermarkets. Every couple of years, marketing specialists would redesign the Bioland label and develop additional marketing tools, such as brochures and leaflets.¹² These recurring activities were intended to visibly distinguish Bioland products from other (pseudo-)organic products and to adapt the label's design to changing marketing trends.

Disruptions from outside the production and distribution chain

Social movements. In line with the insight that social movement actors constitute and challenge markets (Weber et al. 2008; King and Pearce 2010), our data showed that actors from the animal welfare movement disrupted Bioland's qualification. The movement, largely organised by agricultural scientists and veterinarians, disrupted Bioland's qualification by problematising ignorance regarding animal welfare in organic agriculture. Until the mid-1980s, Bioland's producer-members and staff rarely considered animal welfare in their internal debates and discourse, and animal-unfriendly practices, such as indoor dairy farming that involved animals being tied down in the stables, were widespread. Against this background, various groups from the animal welfare movement lobbied for the adoption of the kind of animal husbandry that would respect the natural needs of farm animals. In particular, the leading agricultural scientist of the Naturland Association defended the more natural forms of animal husbandry, especially in relation to cows. His claim was supported by scientists who developed measurable animal welfare criteria. A leading document described the animal welfare situation as follows:

It is necessary to take all measures that support animal-friendly, environmentally compatible, farmer-oriented, but also quality-oriented livestock farming and that do justice not only to the economic importance of the animal but also to the ethical responsibility of humans. How can these requirements be met? Organisations should tighten guidelines for animal

¹² o.V. 1992. "Bioland – Marke mit Zukunft," *Bio-land* (4): 12–23; R. Langerbein 1994. "Bioland stellt Weichen für zukünftige Markenpolitik," *Bio-land* (4): 32–33; age. 2004. "Überzeugende Arbeit," *Bio-land* (3): 46; o. V. 2010. "Neues Bioland-Zeichen," *Bio-land* (10): 39.

husbandry and optimise controls. (Contribution by an employee of the German Animal Welfare Association, 1993, authors' translation)¹³

To some extent, this disruption by the animal welfare movement was positively received by Bioland. In particular, producer-members who saw animal welfare as offering new marketing and differentiation opportunities, as well as possibilities for premium pricing, welcomed the challenge. As a result, Bioland gradually included rules for animal husbandry in its standards, extending the meaning of Bioland's quality even further. However, to avoid losing producer-members who could not meet the new criteria, Bioland introduced transitional rules and exemptions.¹⁴ Today, animal welfare is one of the core elements of the organic qualification led by Bioland.

Research institutes and policymakers. The disruption brought about by actors from the field of German agricultural policy have changed fundamentally over the course of the studied period. Two episodes of disruption were particularly important. In the first, in 1983, research institutes of the German Länder agriculture administration attacked organic product quality so vehemently that Bioland was almost wiped out. During this period, the German agriculture policy field was structured by close ties between the state, the federal agricultural administration, state-funded agricultural research organisations, and the dominant German farmers' association (Rieger 2007). These actors shared strong beliefs in increasing the productivity of farms via the chemicalisation, mechanisation, and specialisation of farms, meaning that alternative production methods, such as organic agriculture, were viewed very negatively. In this context, research institutes of the German Länder agriculture administration challenged the legality of organic qualification in Germany. Specifically, research institutes questioned the alleged "pesticide-free" nature of organic food. Their accusations were based on a scientific study that found that organically produced foods contained approximately the same level of residues of chemical pesticides as conventional agricultural products. These findings could be explained by the drift of pesticides and the fact that the study included a large number of "pseudo-organic" products in its sample.¹⁵ However, based on these findings, research institutes suggested that the organic qualification violated the German food law of 1974, which allowed the pesticide-free designation to be attributed

¹³ S. Hencke. 1993. "Im Visier: Tierhaltung auf dem Bio-Hof," *Bio-land* (3): 26–27.

¹⁴ Bioland. 1989. "Die neuen Bioland-Richtlinien," *Bio-land* (4): 36; S. Braun and H. Hinrich 1989. "Leserbrief zu den neuen Bioland-Richtlinien und Antwort," *Bio-land* (4): 41–42.

¹⁵ U. Ahrenhöfer. 1984. "Auszüge aus der kritischen Stellungnahme von Vertretern des ökologischen Landbaus zur VDLUFAS-Studie," *IFOAM-Bulletin* (1): 13–14.

only to products that had no traces of pesticides whatsoever.¹⁶ Given that it was impossible for a product to be completely “pesticide-free” due to drift from adjacent fields that had been treated with pesticides, Bioland (together with other organic standard-setters) responded to this attack by jointly setting a common meta-standard to defend organic quality. In the preamble, the joint document stated the following:

Consumers’ understanding of general environmental pollution is negatively affected by the idea that , 1984, authors’ translation)¹⁷

The quotation points to an interesting change in the qualification away from the material product and towards the production process that underlies the product. Previously, the qualification process focused on the product. A food item was designated as pesticide-free, with health and naturalness being important elements in the construction of organic quality. Due to the attack by research institutes, focus shifted towards production methods. Consequently, the production process was now designated pesticide-free, with the environment developing into an important element in the qualification:

Organic agriculture and horticulture are land cultivation methods that aim to sustainably and consistently care for the natural resources entrusted in accordance with the interrelationships and interdependencies of the natural order of life. (Bioland standard, 1985, authors’ translation)¹⁸

This shift from product to process, which was necessary to maintaining organic product quality, required the introduction of new organisational forms. In the 1980s, driven by a general trend towards independent third-party certification (Loconto and Busch 2010; Arnold and Hasse 2016; Gustafsson 2020), Bioland started to enforce its qualification via new forms of control by creating a new formal

¹⁶ H. Vetter, W. Kampe, and K. Ranfft. 1983. “Qualität pflanzlicher Nahrungsmittel. Ergebnisse einer 3jährigen Vergleichsuntersuchung an Gemüse, Obst und Brot des modernen und alternativen Warenangebots,” *VDLUFA-Schriftenreihe* (7).

¹⁷ Stiftung ökologischer Landbau; Arbeitsgemeinschaft naturnaher Obst-, Gemüse- und Feldfruchtanbau e.V. (ANOG), Biokreis Ostbayern e.V.; Fördergemeinschaft organisch-biologischer Landbau e.V. (Bioland); Forschungsring biologisch-dynamische Wirtschaftsweise (Demeter); Verband für naturgemäßen Landbau (Naturland) 1984. “Rahmenrichtlinie für die Erzeugung landwirtschaftlicher Produkte aus ökologischem Landbau in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” *IFOAM-Bulletin* (2): 15–20.

¹⁸ Fördergemeinschaft organisch-biologischer Land- und Gartenbau. 1985. “Erzeugungsrichtlinien der Fördergemeinschaft organisch-biologischer Land- und Gartenbau e. V. 3. Lesung,” *Bio-land* (5): 5.

organisational unit, notably an independent certification commission (Anerkennungskommission). While control was previously maintained informally by producer-members who visited each other's farms, organising controls were now the prerogative of the certification commission, whose procedures were formally accredited by the association of German organic organisations (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ökologischer Landbau, AGÖL). This disruption underlines Bioland's tremendous organisational effort (the creation of new organisational units and the introduction of organisational elements, such as independent certification and accreditation procedures) in addition to shifts in focus (from product to process) to maintain its organic product quality. These organisational efforts were supported by the European Community (EC), which, in 1991, decided to grant additional subsidies to organic farms (to reduce agricultural overproduction) and started regulating the use of labels such as "organic" (Lampkin et al. 1999). However, growing acceptance of organic quality did not protect Bioland from further disruption, as Bioland was suddenly confronted with new policies promoting organic agriculture and legally protecting organic qualification. This brings us to the second disruption that originated in the field of agriculture policy.

In 1991, the EC adopted "Regulation (EEC) No. 2092/91 on organic production of agricultural products and indications referring thereto to agricultural products and foodstuff." While the regulation outlawed "pseudo-organic products," it transferred organic product quality to what Thévenot (1984) described as the "state form," which could be used by anyone. By developing this regulation related to organic product quality, policymakers disrupted Bioland's qualification because it was no longer clear what Bioland's quality actually stood for and what distinguished it from the qualification led by the EC. This disruption intensified in 2001, when the German government introduced a voluntary state label for organic foods (named *Biosiegel*) that met the requirements of EC regulations. From then on, supermarkets, and other distributors could rely on well-known regulations for organic qualification without having to cooperate with Bioland. In short, Bioland was in danger of becoming obsolete:

Since the EC Regulation "Organic Farming" has come into force, competition in the organic market has intensified. The range of organic producers [...] has grown considerably, and food retailers are entering the market with their own brands [...] It is our task to emphasise Bioland as a trademark with special qualities in the future and to assert it on the market. (Report by Bioland's executive on the new label policy, 1994, authors' translation)¹⁹

¹⁹ R. Langerbein. 1994. "Bioland stellt die Weichen für die zukünftige Markenpolitik," *Bio-land* (4): 33.

Once again, Bioland responded by setting new rules, although, unlike during previous disruption, these rules were not aimed at expanding the qualification space by establishing new relationships. This time, the rules served as a means of distinguishing Bioland quality from the state form and the qualities of other organic standard-setters. More specifically, Bioland wanted to make its standards stricter and for its product quality to be “more” organic than its competitors’ organic qualities. For example, Bioland set ambitious rules for animal husbandry, giving animals more attention than the official organic regulations. In so doing, Bioland invested in a wide variety of promotional materials (e.g. brochures, websites, posters) to discursively demonstrate the superiority of its organic product quality.

Media. The media disrupted Bioland’s qualification by informing the public of malpractice among German organic food producers. The most prominent disruption was the so-called nitrofen scandal. In 2002, state authorities discovered residue of the illegal pesticide nitrofen in animal feed used on organic farms, prompting media headlines such as “Trust Gambled Away,”²⁰ “Innocence Lost,”²¹ or “Organic Poultry Picked Contaminated Grains.”²² In the articles, journalists scandalised the nitrofen detection, which fundamentally threatened the legitimacy of organic product quality. Although scientific investigations later revealed that the contamination occurred in a storage facility where not only organic products were stored and that Bioland-qualified products were not affected, Bioland reacted immediately. Bioland invested in transparency by establishing a strict separation of Bioland production chains from other (conventional and organic) food production chains and developing a commodity traceability system. These organisational endeavours were intended to limit the risk posed by future legitimacy threats and resulted in further expansion of the meaning, which now also included food safety.

Other organic standard-setters. While Bioland cooperated with other standard-setters in defending organic product quality from attacks by agricultural research institutes, these other formal organisations also acted as sources of disruption. We know that organic standard-setters are in competition with one another (Reinecke et al. 2012; Fouilleux and Loconto 2017), and it was this competition for producer-members that disturbed Bioland’s qualification in the late 1990s. Until 1999,

²⁰ C. Meroy. 2002. “Vertrauen verspielt.” *Frankfurter Neuer Presse*, 27 May 2002.

²¹ Nordkurier. 2002. “Verlorene Unschuld.” 28 May 2002.

²² Hamburger Morgenpost. 2002. “Bio-Geflügel pickte verseuchte Körner.” 25 May 2002.

Bioland had not allowed the use of copper in potato production, while other organic standard-setters (except for Demeter) all allowed copper as “natural” protection against fungal diseases. Bioland took the position that copper was harmful to other microorganisms in the soil and should therefore be banned. However, when a fungal disease caused severe decline in a potato harvest, the producer-members threatened to leave Bioland and become members of competing organic standard-setters that allowed the use of copper. To safeguard its relationship with producer-members, Bioland decided to reclassify copper:

With the extreme weather conditions [like last year’s summer], many would have asked themselves, “Do I use copper, or do I move away from Bioland?” In addition, there is the high dependency of many farms on potatoes and the competition with other associations [i.e. standard-setters], which, with the exception of Demeter, allow copper to be used. (Report from Bioland General Assembly, 1999, authors’ translation)²³

This disruption illustrates that Bioland’s product quality was affected by other relevant standard-setters, especially when producer-members (on which Bioland was depending) used the available alternatives as leverage. However, Bioland found the means to stabilise its product quality by once again revising its rules.

Long-term shifts in organic qualification

A summary look at our empirical results shows that Bioland reacted to disruptions triggered by actors located along the production and distribution chain (producer-members, processors, supermarkets) as well as outside it (media, social movements, competitors, policymakers, and research institutes). In so doing, Bioland reacted swiftly to disruptions caused by media, social movements, or research institutes and did not wait until actors who were imperative to the production and trade of qualified products (e.g. producers, distributors) challenged the process. Bioland as a standard-setter thus operated in a manner like producers who observe the signals of other actors in the field because they are unable to know in advance how consumers will react to their production decisions (White 1981).

Given that more and more actors became involved in qualification, the qualification space constantly expanded. All the stabilising efforts that we identified were pragmatic responses by Bioland to fix momentary disruption. At the same time, responses shaped the unfolding of that process by creating new relationships (e.g. Bioland’s relationships with beekeepers or supermarkets), eliciting new decisions about the standardisation system (e.g. revising and adding rules,

²³ Age. 1999. “Pragmatisch, aber nicht anpasslerisch,” *Bio-land* (1): 42.

creating new forms of control), or initiating shifts in meaning (e.g. inclusion of food safety, emphasis on animal welfare). In other words, singular disruption to which Bioland has reacted has affected the quality and its underlying process in a long-lasting way. For example, the nitrofen scandal had a lasting impact on Bioland's qualification. As we have shown, Bioland reacted to the scandal by strictly separating Bioland production chains from other conventional and organic food production chains and by developing a traceability system. Implementation of this latter instrument was a pragmatic response taken by Bioland at a particular point in time, but it made food safety a central part of further qualification, an outcome that was highly appreciated by producers and supermarkets. By emphasising food safety, Bioland was able to successfully distinguish its organic quality from those of its competitors. The empirical study thus shows that standardisation is a continuous, dynamic process that does not lead to closure (Loconto and Demortain 2017) while at the same time unveiling four main shifts in the unclosed organic qualification process. We discuss these shifts separately, although they are intertwined and together make up the dynamics of standardised quality.

The first dynamic is reflected in a shift in meaning of organic quality from economic self-help to an environmental project that emphasises the value of animal welfare and safety. This shift is relevant for those who are interested in the specific content of organic quality, such as rural sociologists or food policymakers. It highlights the contingency of the meaning of a supposedly stable quality – a contingency of which the actors involved in momentary qualification are seldom aware. Rhetorically asked, which consumer, producer, or supermarket today knows the former meanings of organic quality and/or would assume that organic quality has something to do with self-help? Identifying long-term shifts in the meaning of quality adds to the literature on qualification as it sheds light on the little-studied long-term development of quality (Musselin and Paradeise 2005), demonstrating that quality is not only contested and changeable at certain moments but also over time – even when it is supported by standards.

In contrast to the first, organic-specific change, the second is more abstract, referring to the shift in focus of the qualification from product to process. This shift was exemplified by the value “pesticide-free,” which Bioland first attributed to food products but later to the production process. This change in standard-setting is the result of a criterion bias, as the standard-setter qualified what is easier to measure and evaluate (Singer 1996: 212 f.) – and these are processes rather than the material properties of food. Consequently, this article and the “quality turn” (Allaire and Sylvander 1997; Murdoch et al. 2000) are not only about new product quality, but above all about new process quality. This prioritisation of standardising processes (and not products)

explains why consumers and the media are often surprised when they discover that organic food is not necessarily healthier, as standards focus on processes rather than on the food products themselves (EatSmarter! 2018). For scholars of valuation and qualification this shift is of interest because it suggests that product quality is justified in the longer term by processes rather than by material properties.

The focus on process quality manifests in the fact that during long-term qualification, Bioland increasingly organised production and trade processes, deploying rules, standards, or control and traceability systems to ward off disruption. Even though organic qualification started with the creation of formal organisation (Bioland) and new specialised organisational divisions were added later, Bioland stabilised quality continuously with the use of various organisational elements (rules, standards, and controls). As a result, we can observe a third shift from formal organisation to an accumulation of organisational elements that operate outside the boundaries of Bioland between the standard-setter and the producer-members, the supermarkets, retailers, and other involved parties. This shift discovered in the context of organic qualification reflects the accumulation of standards and control (e.g. Djelic and den Hond 2013; Gustafsson 2020) as well as fundamental change in the organisational world, where new, less bureaucratic and more flexible forms of organisations, distinct from the rather classic, formal organisation, are gaining societal relevance (e.g. Ahrne and Brunsson 2011, 2019; Bartley et al. 2019). These new organisational elements that come into play outside formal organisations require attention if we are to study and better understand the nexus between organisation, on the one hand, and valuation and qualification, on the other (Hauge 2016; Meier and Peetz 2021).

Finally, our empirical study shows that Bioland has invested not only in its organisation but also in relationships to maintain its quality. While Bioland initially focused on its relationship with producer-members over time, the standard-setter has increasingly responded to disruption triggered by actors operating outside the production and commodity chain (e.g. media, state, and social movement), building meaningful relationships with them. This shift towards multifaceted relationships has been central to the stabilisation (and paradoxically also the dynamics) of standardised quality. Thus far, research on food qualification has attributed the importance of relationality exclusively to singular niche products. This bias is evident in the study by Varga (2019), who argued that alternative food networks – characterised by strong civil society embeddedness – qualify food based on relations between farmers, their suppliers, and workers and customers. In contrast, and following his argumentation, standard-setters, such as Bioland do not rely on relationships but instead use product-oriented standards to realise their large-scale qualification in conventional

markets. This dichotomous distinction between standards and relations may result in the misleading conclusion that relations are irrelevant to the construction of standardised quality. Contrary to this dichotomous understanding, this article provides empirical evidence that the key insight of valuation studies, namely that processes of quality and value construction are always relational (Heinich 2020; Kuipers and Franssen 2020), also applies to standardised quality and products. However, to discover that controversies and relationships matter in standardised qualification, the analytical focus must be expanded spatially and temporally.

Conclusion

If we take the diversity and extent of the identified changes seriously (shifts in meaning, qualification focus, organisation, and relationships), we must ask what has not shifted during qualification. This brings us back to our original question, which asked both what has changed and what has stayed the same. The placative, pointed answer would probably be that apart from the terms “organic” and “Bioland,” hardly anything has remained the same. In this sense, we confirm the thesis that one should understand the “stability of standards [...] as the result of underlying dynamic processes” (Brunsson et al. 2012: 627). This means that the multiple shifts we discovered in qualification are a necessary condition for organic quality having existed in German food markets for around 30 years. Against this background, we conclude that not only is every good category a living one (Bowker and Star 1999), but also standardised qualification must be dynamic and changeable if it is to be stably relevant in markets.

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