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Differentiating, valuing, appreciating as collective object-grounded processes: the case of the wine authentic quality

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Tpt 1 Making objects matter without a laboratory

Foreword

The case of wine terroir quality supports this study. So unless you were all wine enthusiasts, I shall need to specify rapidly what terroir is.

A terroir is made of the elements that may have contributed to the specific taste quality, acknowledged by a particular reputation, of a given vineyard. These elements can be as well vine-growing or wine-making practices, or agronomical, meteorological peculiarities.

The French AOCs – AOC stands for a Controlled Denomination of Origin - is a quality differentiation device, which tries to protect and promote the terroir quality of the AOC wines. The AOC label is awarded if the elaboration process follows a series of vine growing and wine making constraints and if the wine passes a taste test. So the AOC differentiation is grounded both upon a guarantee of means and result.

Tpt 2 An example of a wine label with an AOC indication.

Tpt 3 Terroir no more matters! Back to terroir

The French wine AOC sign has been accused not to discriminate sufficiently among wine qualities. This is not new.

However since a few years, a new event has occurred: its tasting test has discarded every year a handful of wines made by famous wine makers, known as very much committed in the elaboration of top terroir quality wines. Moreover, these terroir wines have been rejected on the ground that they were not representative of their terroirs.

These refused producers along with their supporters reject this conclusion and its advices for correcting their wines so that they can fit the next testing session. They claim that their wines are the deepest expression of their terroir and that it is the tasting panel members who are perverted by the commercial orientations, which they hope to give their wines.

The refused producers denounce the drift that the demand focused commercial strategies followed by most of the producers of less famous AOC impose on terroir definition. In their opinion, terroir is terroir and does not have to fit the customer's tastes. For them, the correction advices that accompany the refusal of their samples are the highest point of the perversion of the terroir quality, which cannot be corrected to fit other references than it.

They claim therefore for a reform of the AOC system to allow a come back of the terroir into the AOC differentiation.

Tpt 4 A reform of the AOC regulation

The AOC administration has agreed to launch a reform project.

The means constraints have been strengthened and the tasting procedure revised so as to include trained panellists and not only producers but a large range of professional tasters such as wine waiters, retailers etc.

But the point now is how will they judge the quality of the wines?

What allows recognizing and certifying a terroir wine?

The administration has called for a list of criteria. But such a list is always seen as too simplistic or rigid to capture the complex quality of terroir. Neither has the notion of “taste family” encountered success amongst the producers. Apart from a few consensual defects there is no agreement on precise tastes a wine should show or not show. What terroir actually is is under constant controversy.

Some of the terroir supporters even argue that this specific notion of what terroir is has been lost and needs to be rediscovered. They have invested in an intense searching activity where the terroir understandings of the producers are examined, where all practices are scrutinized, all new wines tasted and their achievements discussed. At least for the moment, Terroir is a quest and terroir producers are definitively opposed to a before hand delimitation of *terroir* quality. It would equate to defining in advance the result of their quest. That would be unconceivable for not only do they not know where their return to *terroir* is going to lead them, but also neither do they want to be restricted in their search.

So no quality test seems to arise to allow the reform go further.

Some may argue that one has to wait that producers finish their task of rediscovering the terroir. But the more they search, the more terroir quality is controversial, the more it gets differentiated according to the different practices, vine lots, producers, vintages...

Tpt 5 Resorting to science

Sciences have long been working on this issue. Taste sciences along with agronomy have tried to identify quality criteria or indices.

The failure of agronomy to define terroir

But agronomy has chiefly achieved an ever growing list of factors to take into account and shrinking list of characteristic traits. Most of these scientists agree that it is impossible to provide a resistant definition of terroir quality. Some of them try to defend the notion by looking for positive side effects of the search of terroir, such as sustainable agriculture; others on the contrary denounce an ill-grounded notion, a socially constructed illusion, a marketing manipulation or an economic barrier.

Une conclusion similaire et étonnante des sciences du goût

Taste scientists too have been looking for an object grounded reference to terroir through the analysis of the organoleptic perception of the resulting wines. They have failed too and reached quite a different conclusion. The problem is not wines and terroir, but tastes: “food tastes are irreducibly “idiosyncratic”, “personal” and “immeasurable” (Mac Leod, 2008).

Following these conclusions it is definitively vain to search any longer for terroir be it a “true” notion or not.

The conclusion of the taste sciences is rather surprising: taste would be idiosyncratic and communication, purposeless. But, following this conclusion, what is the purpose of all our discussions on food, of all firm consumer tasting juries? Would people have expected that long to acknowledge that food taste comments be like a dialogue of the deaf? Should we doubt the proficiency of these experienced scientists?

Tpt 6 The laboratory failure

Lets examine how taste scientists come to this point.

Different tasters do not provide the same account of the same wine. To account for this diversity, neurophysiologic taste sciences introduce the notion of “influence”. Sensation, the result of the virgin reception of the stimulus sent by the wine is processed by the human nervous system and namely the brain where, the set of data to be processed is enlarged to other “information” like former experiences, other tasters’ accounts, to all kind of knowledge the taster may see as helpful to interpret his perception. This enlargement of the data set is seen as an “influence” on the original sensation. The fact that this influence is seen as particular to each tasters allows explaining the interindividual diversity.

In order to “clear” the sensation from this “subjective” blurring, they recur to the blind tasting technique. In a blind tasting device, the taster hardly knows but in general terms what he tastes. By limiting the information about the tasted product, taste scientists intend to impede the enlargement of the data taken into account by the taster and thus to remove the “subject” from the perception.

Blind tasting is therefore a crucial technique to allow for the “purification” in Latours’ words of the phenomena.

However, blind tasting does not discard discrepancies between the tasters. This has led these scientists to look for discrepancies among the different tasters’ sensory systems, which they have found¹.

This is why they conclude that each sensory system provides for different accounts of the original stimulus sent by the taste object. So there maybe a common terroir quality of wines, but individual sensory apparatuses are so much varied that it is not possible to get a shared perception of it. So the question of terroir is vain.

Booth agronomy and taste sciences fail to provide a purified notion of terroir and conclude that this notion is more or less ill-grounded.

However, these conclusions have not stopped the quest for terroir of the wine producers who struggle to allow it an always greater place by stripping off their practices: any technique which can be suspected to add something to the terroir expression or to overshadow it is discarded.

The producers’ practices change. The wine tastes change too, which they see as a sign of a greater terroir expression. But just like individual tastes multiply, wine tastes diversify too.

¹ Chemical senses such as olfaction or taste are, in the taste sciences conclusions different from physical senses such as vision, touch or hearing in the fact that the sensory receptors are not homogeneous among the population.

Terroir advocates are convinced that their search for terroir is difficult; it is complex and difficult to grasp. So they do not stop to put it into question. However, they do not proceed the same way as the taste sciences to experience it.

Tpt 7 Making terroir matter

A distributed evaluation

Contrary to taste sciences, its members do not try to isolate their assessment and inquire about other wine tasters judgements. They do neither content themselves with a single tasting occasion: they multiply their own tasting experiences.

The generality of this evaluation is achieved through the accumulation of different experiences instead of by reduction to a standardized laboratory situation.

A critique-based enrolment

As emphasized by agronomy, or taste sciences, terroir is a controversial notion, even amongst the terroir advocates. So the enrolment of supporters is an important issue.

In Bruno Latour's account, Pasteur has a laboratory at his disposal. He uses the representativity relations, which he is capable of building between his laboratory and a set of particular situations to successively enrol large groups of people whom he manages to interest.

As demonstrated by M. Callon in his article on the scallops' domestication, the laboratory situation serves as a spokesperson for the set of concrete situations, just as the fishermen's representatives serve as spokespersons for the interests of the fishermen. By inviting the spokesperson of the bay fishermen to take part in the experiments, the scientists manage, as long as the laboratory situation and the spokesperson both remain "representative", to propose an effective farming method where scallops multiply and fishermen let them grow. However, this exercise necessitates that the scallops be described and defined.

Maybe the definition work is not yet accomplished. Perhaps it might never be if *terroir* becomes a quest, like truth, beauty or God.

Enrolment by a laboratory leads to translation difficulties, namely how to express the addressed issue so that it coincides with the interests, the language, etc. and the steps taken by the enrolled actants. Where microbes became germs to the hygienists, the scallops become a source of income to the fishermen. Researchers protect themselves against harmful interactions, which could arise from this translation.

The collective open understanding of terroir allows for a different "critique-based" enrolment where the question of the acceptability of each terroir understanding needs to be monitored so as to make sure that the collective formed by the supporters is not about to break into pieces.

Therefore all assessments are assessed and so their authors and their interpretations of the terroir and the set of the acceptable terroir oriented practices. The resulting critique collective has thus frontiers and does not include whoever wants to, whatever terroir definition, or agronomical practices.

The enlargement of the object under assessment

Contrary to taste sciences, wine advocates do not discard sighted tasting as biased. On the contrary a proper assessment requires a deep understanding of what they are judging. And they resort to thorough enquiries by questioning the wine producer about its practices, visiting the vineyard, comparing the wine with other similar productions. Sighted tasting allows asking in each particular case how terroir is supposed to matter so as to focus on its relevant taste features.

Instead of trying split up the expression of terroir into an object source and a subject receptor the object under assessment is enlarged to the commitment and terroir understanding of the author of the wine, the practices he has invented and selected in order to achieve a particular terroir expression.

Terroir is indeed controversial but not absolute non sense: products, practices, commitments are endlessly compared and discussed.

Although each wine producer or enthusiast may compete to try to put forward his own views on terroir, the assessment performed by the collective allows a variety of understandings to cohabit.

A distributed and non popperian proof

The judgement produced by this “critique-based control” does not proceed by selective representation but by inclusion. The resulting judgement is not illusory; it is distributed.

The achieved notion of terroir, though more learned, remains temporary and irremediably collective.

The consequences of this different way of investigating terroir are significant:

The test, which the European Commission is asking for, is impossible because this critique led assessment cannot be reduced to a test involving only a limited amount of “representative” people in a “representative” place within a predetermined delay.

Any test is always unbearably “simplistic”. It demands representativity where representativity is irremediably lacking. So a proving procedure alternative to the test has to be elaborated.

Tpt 8 Conclusion

In conclusion, science is not the only one to make objects matter; and actors may even achieve it in spite of the failure of the scientific work.

How does *terroir* get to matter?

It is the “critique-based control” of *terroir* quality operated by the producers, wines, retailers, wine journalists and wine drinkers which produce this result.

“Critique-based control” intends to extend the notion of “trial” put forward by Bruno Latour and the literature coming from the Science and Technology Studies to non testable proof. Test seems to be a particular trial suitable to popperian situations where phenomena can be defined and decomposed, which is not the case here.

However much strange this situation could seem, it’s not unusual. Let’s think of art, or even the scientific critique. Not the discovering activity performed within laboratories, but the truth assessment by the scientific critique.

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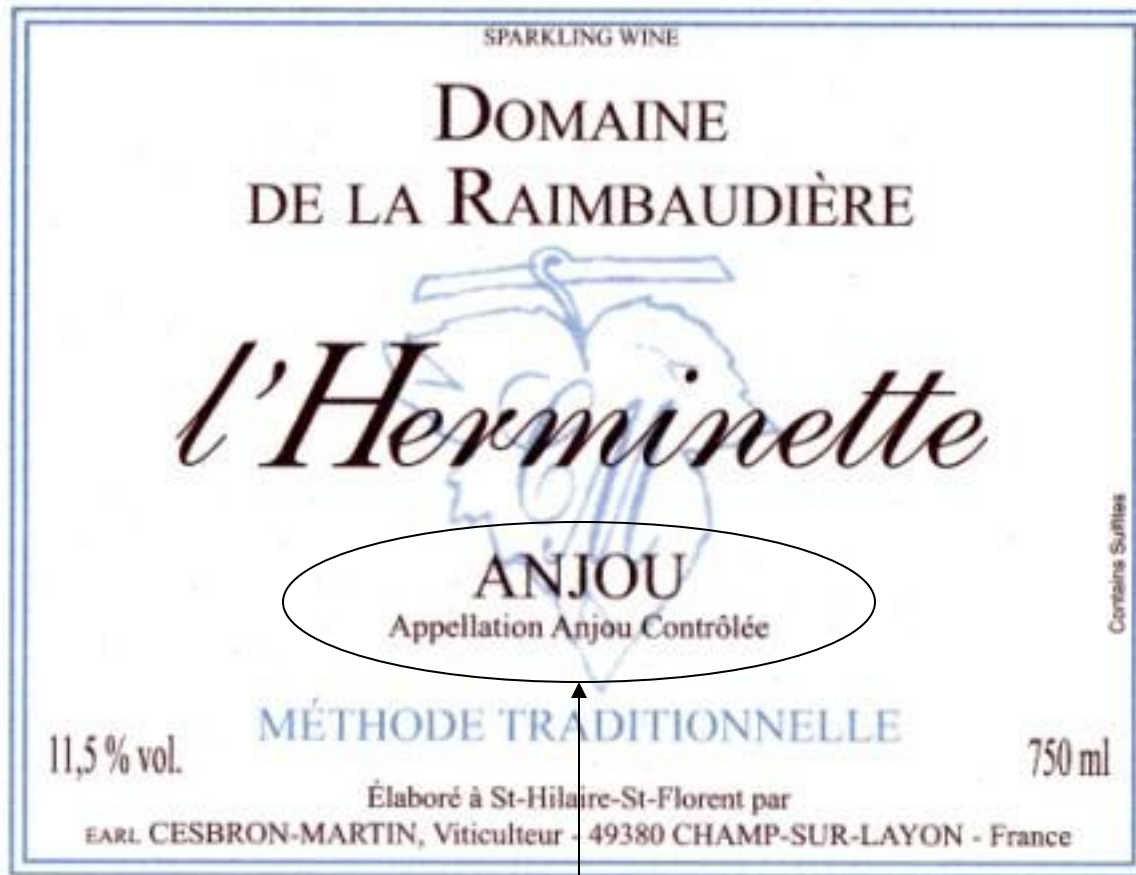
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Differentiating, valuing, appreciating as
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the case of the terroir wine authentic quality

A terroir is “a **delimited geographical** space in which a human community builds through time a **collective understanding** of production based on a system of **interactions** between a **physical and biological environment** and a set of **human factors**”. (UNESCO’s definition)



Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC)

Terroir no more matters!

The rebellion of AOC wine producers

Famous AOC wines rejected by the AOC tasting procedure :
“not representative of their terroir”

Incriminated wine producers - and followers - answer:

- “• It’s not the wine which is faulty, but the tasting jury proficiency which is perverted.
- There is a surreptitious commercial drift of the terroir quality: short term cash flow needs incline less famous wine makers to fit to customers needs instead of focussing on terroir expression. ”

=> TERROIR HAS BEEN BLURRED IF NOT LOST !

AOC need urgently to come back to terroir

A reform of the AOC regulation

- Guarantee of means is changed and reinforced

CEE, French administration require an objective test of the outcoming quality



- Guarantee of result

Panelists will be trained and diversified

- > The jury is opened to non producers, retailers, wine critics, wine waiters...

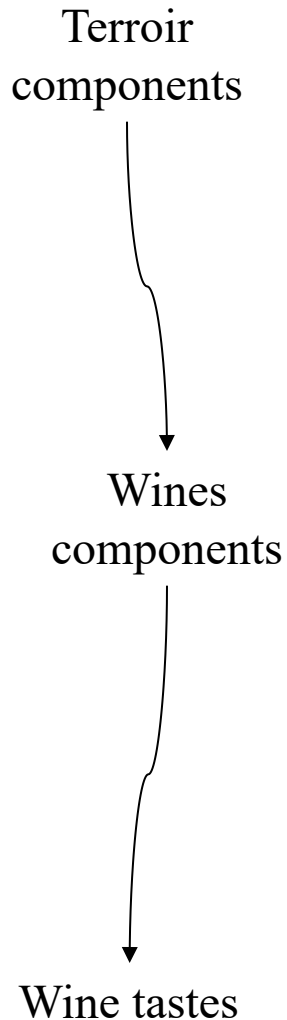
BUT how will they proceed? What will they judge? What is terroir quality?

Terroir has been lost and needs to be rediscovered

Terroir is a very controversial notion even among terroir supporters

Terroir is a quest and cannot be defined before hand!

Resorting to science



The failure of agronomy to define terroir

Sociology: Terroir is a social construct

Economy: Terroir is a market barrier; the search for side-effects

=> *Terroir as an object grounded property does not exist*

Taste sciences

“food tastes are irreducibly “idiosyncratic”, “personal” and “immeasurable” (Mac Leod, 2008)

=> *The terroir quality search is vain*

The laboratory failure

Multiple sensations:
a variety of sensory
apparatus

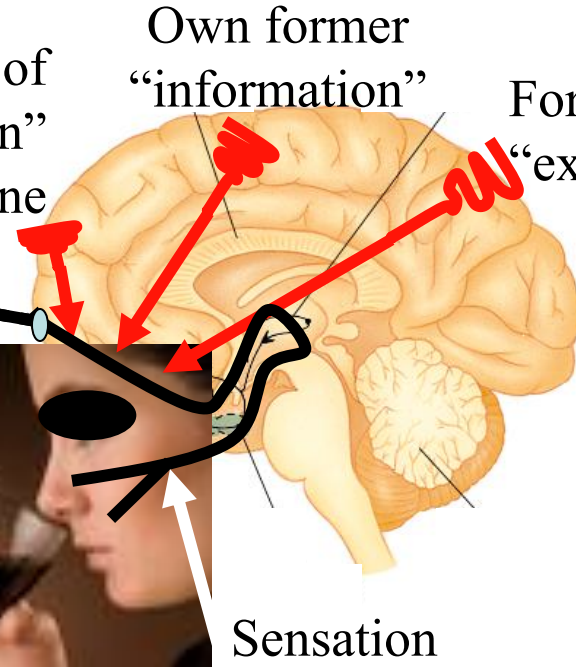
Other sources of
“information”
about the wine

Own former
“information”

Former
“experiences”



~~Blind tasting~~



Sensation

Multiple influences => Multiple sensory apparatus

Taste sciences fail to “purify” the tasting situation

Yet actors do not proceed this way in their attempts to make terroir matter

Making terroir matter through *critique-based control*

A distributed evaluation

- An extensive non reductionist (lab) assessment procedure: multiplication of unrelated tasting occasions

A critique-based enrolment into the assessing collective

- A delimited assessing collective: not everyone is seen as terroir-assessing proficient

The enlargement of the object under assesement

- The imprescindible knowledge of the producer's terroir understandings and practices
- A necessary sighted tasting technique
- Terroir, a controversial notion, but not “absolute non sense”

A distributed and non popperian proof

- No representative sample
- No representative assessor
- No definitive judgement

=>This critique-led control does not fit into a 'test'

Conclusion

Terroir matters in spite of the failure of scientific work...

... thanks to a distributed assessment procedure

A critique-based control

- A proof without a laboratory
- A non popperian device
- A wide enrolment device