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Typicality, a judgement support for the wine critique¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the role "typicality" can play in the concrete quality wine market organisation. "Typicality" is often denounced as being an illusion, a kind of purely social construct used to enhance sales, create scarcity and high prices. These assumptions imply that the goodness of produce can be immediately perceived. The anthropological study of this particular market and the focus on the perception of quality show on the contrary that it is not. Quality is the result of the wine critique's work and "typicality" is an intermediary notion that helps the wine critique to judge the wines. So rather than being a purely economic notion, the production of "typicality" appears to be fairly similar to the production of style in other artistic domains, and the denominations of origin are closer to author's rights than to economic measures designed to produce scarcity.

Keywords : Typicality, wines, wine critique, quality markets, sociology

¹ The expression "critique" should be distinguished, as in French, from "critics". The first refers to the whole community of the latter.

1. TYPICALITY AS AN ILLUSION

Much scientific work (Rapp, 1993, Noble, Williams and Langron, 1984, Bayonove, 1993, Fribourg et Sarfati, 1989) has been aimed at objectivating the typicality of origin labelled wines. Some conclude to a molecule (in the best cases), others to nothing more than chance (in the worst cases). They use chemical analyses to explore the wine components for possible sets of molecules able to discriminate among typical wines. They can also use human beings and find out if their taste is able to discriminate between wines of different origins. As none of these methods has ever led to a definitive answer, typicality has become a **socio-cultural illusion**, a kind of belief causing a Bordeaux to be necessarily good, a sort of empty shell guarantee that generates simultaneously confidence and satisfaction in the consumer. This illusion is said to be used to enhance sales and, through the delimitation of PDOs, to generate high prices by limiting the wine quantities produced.

Despite the fact that *typicality* is, in this point of view, an illusion, many wine lovers still consider that Bordeaux or Burgundy wines are still the more valuable if not the best wines. A belief probably also shared by the marketers who use this illusion, as well as by the economists who denounce it.

Why does *typicality* then generate such confidence, if it is indeed an illusion and as such has no link to the wine itself?

To answer these questions, I shall use an empirical and sociological standpoint and examine what *typicality* is from the actors' points of view, how they define it, how they use it, and what its characteristics are.

2. WHAT IS TYPICALITY FOR THE ACTORS?

2.1. An old and general taste description

Firstly, *typicality* is a general taste description related to a specific category of wines. It was most often linked to an area of production and to the often-specific local way of producing wine :

"Le vin appelé l'Hermitage est produit sur les coteaux qui surplombent le village de Tain l'Hermitage. C'est sur l'un d'eux que se trouve l'Hermitage qui, sur deux miles a donné son nom au coteau et au vin qui en est issu. Trois coteaux seulement donnent un vin de première qualité et

uniquement sur les terrains situés à mi-côte. Ils ont environ 300 pieds de hauteur et 3/4 de miles en longueur, avec une physionomie méridionale. Le sol est à peine teinté de rouge, composé de "terre pourrie", mais là où l'on produit le meilleur vin, il n'y a pas trace visible de terre. La vigne croît sur des terrasses en pente. On n'y met que très peu de fumure..." (Thomas Jefferson in Ginestet, 1996).

Secondly, typicality is not a recent invention and was not born with the "invention" of AOCs. Long ago, wines already had *typicality* :

"Le vin rouge de Nebiule qu'on produit par ici est unique en son genre. Il est pratiquement aussi fruité que le madère, aussi astringent au palais qu'un bordeaux et aussi pétillant qu'un champagne" (Thomas Jefferson in Ginestet, 1996).

2.2. Who produces typicality?

Let a 19th century wine merchant answer:

"La quantité [de vin de Bordeaux] que l'on en récolte est si considérable et les nuances qui distinguent entre eux ceux de chaque espèce sont si multipliées que le négociant le plus expérimenté ne peut pas parvenir à les apprécier toutes, surtout lorsqu'il achète des vins nouveaux qui doivent subir plusieurs métamorphoses avant de parvenir à leur plus haut degré de qualité, et qui, suivant le sol, son exposition, l'âge de la vigne, le cépage dont elle est peuplée, les soins donnés à la culture et à la vinification, deviendront parfaits ou se détérioreront au bout de plus ou moins de temps. Dans un vignoble aussi considérable et dont la qualité des produits varie à l'infini, la connaissance de toutes ces circonstances ne peut pas être acquises par le même homme¹. C'est pourquoi les négociants de Bordeaux font rarement des acquisitions importantes sans avoir recours à leurs courtiers... [qui] comparent entre les vins de chaque cru, depuis le moment de leur fabrication jusqu'à leur extrême vieillesse" (cité par Markham, Dewey, 1855, p. 73).

Typicality is constructed by a community of experts, wines merchants, brokers, wine lovers... the gastronomic critics, the producers themselves. Let us say the whole wine critique², i.e., the community of people involved in evaluating the quality of wines.

2.3. Vintage, grape, origin... aesthetic categorisation

In order to be more precise, more discriminating, the quality evaluation rests on a taste reference. It defines the best quality of all categories of wines and makes the different wines of a category comparable. The use of the categorisation of wines allows avoiding the risk of reducing intense variations of taste to small differences of description.

All wine guides always use a pre-existent classification of wines, Denominations of Origin (DOs) or grapes or vintages, in order to create a space in which the products may be compared and achieve a more precise evaluation of quality.

A wine will be more or less typical just as a painting can be judged to be a more or less close representation of a particular style. An aesthetic reference makes clear a definite quality and justifies its aesthetic interest.

Origin is not the only wine characteristic used to define *typicality*. The critique also defines the *typicality* of wine grapes, of vintages, of production processes (the ageing of a wine for instance). One does not judge a Merlot in the same way as a *Nebbiolo* or a *tempranillo*, or an 85 as a 94 in *Porto* wines.

Therefore, *typicality* helps judge with precision the quality of a wine by giving a taste standard, a reference. It is a support to the quality judgement.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF TYPICALITY AS PRODUCED BY THE WINE CRITIQUE

As style in an artwork, as truth in scientific facts, *typicality* is the *result* of work accomplished by the wine experts' community based on the properties of the product.

3.1. A controversial notion

Typicality is a controversial notion. As in the evaluation of quality, the critique – in sense of all the experts – does not agree over the existence of *typicality* nor over its definition or the ways to capture it adequately. The wine journals are one of the main forums for debates about wine *typicality* : The *typicality* of each wine is judged, but what *typicality* itself is, is discussed too. At present, the journals recount extensively debates about Spanish or Tokai wines for instance. Since the fall of the Berlin wall, many west European wineries have been investing in the Tokai region. They have bought

wineries and wine stocks. These wines, which the western critique has not been able to sample for long years, have shown noticeable tastes of oxidation generally associated with a defect. There is at present a heated debate on whether the typical taste of *Tokai* is an oxidised taste, as in *Madere* wines or some *Jerez* wines, and whether it belongs to the aesthetic purpose of *Tokai* wines ; or if the oxidation is the result of years of socialism and consequential loss of good wine making practices, and thus is a defect that must be avoided.

Depending on whether one is a conservative or a modernist, one will argue that "we are going to kill an ancient style of wine" or "we should revive it by giving it back the qualities it should never have lost".

3.2. A changing and flexible taste reference

As in the *Tokai* example, the *typicality* of a wine may change with the introduction of new production techniques, as a result of disease for instance. The *typicality* of Bordeaux wines changed considerably at the end of the 19th century and again around the Second World War.

Typicality is not a guarantee. Guarantee is provided by the critique that strongly contributes to build the reputation on one particular quality signal. Remember that many DOs do not succeed in generating great confidence in their name nor prices significantly higher than those of ordinary table wines generate.

Typicality is therefore not an arbitrary barrier aimed at creating scarcity and raising prices. It is obviously not the case in Bordeaux wines for instance whose area and prices have been constantly growing.

3.3. The problem of copies/imitations/fakes?

Typicality is fundamentally related to the taste of wines in a specific category, and so to the products. It is not a socio-cultural illusion, but it is not as strongly linked to taste as fraud detection services based on the scientific kind of proof would require it to be.

In fact, the existing vigilance of *typicality* that is done by the whole wine critique is not based on a classical scientific instrument of proof. Such an instrument would be able to decide, using the same protocol for all wines subject to the same specific conditions, whether a wine is typical or not.

On the contrary, the wine critique uses the community of palates, which they form to evaluate for each particular wine in all required kinds of condition of tasting, whether a wine is typical, or not.

This kind of proof, although not scientific, builds a strong and nevertheless flexible relation between a category of wines and an aesthetic reference that allows it to evolve following the possible new interpretations of tradition. It also prevents wines from an undetectable imitation where some molecules would simply be added to any kind of beverage.

However, the work of the critique, although very efficient, is slow and insufficient to protect typical wines from being imitated, whether as vintages, grapes, or origins.

The "typicality fraud" means that a wine, which has not belonged to the process of making merge the typicality, nevertheless claims for this *typicality*. It is more or less the same in the case of author's rights. A painting, for instance, that has not been identified as belonging to the work of a particular author and thus has not participated in the elaboration of the style and quality of this author, is not allowed to bear the name of the author³.

The solution has therefore been to build a strong link between the produce and its *typicality* using origin in the case of PDOs, or grape type or vintage. They allow an easier proof, although there is no scientific and definitive proof of a specificity link between a vintage or grape and the corresponding *typicality*.

CONCLUSION

Typicality is not a social illusion, a purely social construct. Although it is not a scientifically demonstrated link, it is a taste reference strongly linked to the products it qualifies. This taste reference is necessary to the process of quality judgement carried out by the wine critique.

As a taste reference, the notion of *typicality* is the same whether it is a *typicality* of origin, grapes or vintage or ageing. So,

- If you want to be judged as a 1984 vintage, you have to use 1984 harvested grapes ;
- If you want to be judged as a Chardonnay wine, you have to use *Chardonnay* grapes ;
- If you want to be judged as a *Rioja*, you have to use *Rioja* grapes.

However, it is not the *relative* scarcity resulting from such delimitation that generates high prices ; it is the ability of the thus delimited categories of wine to create a highly valued *typicality* among the critique.

This is why *Bordeaux* or *Rioja* reach good price levels despite their extensive area when so many small DOs hardly reach better prices than table wines.

In the same way, the author's rights that delimit its works, generate scarcity but not necessarily a high price. On the other hand, some prolific authors like Bernard Buffet have reached very high prices.

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NOTES

- (1) We underscore this.
- (2) In this paper, the word "critique" is used in the French sense of the community of all the wine critics. Moreover, in order to avoid any ambiguity, we shall use «wine expert» instead of wine critic.
- (3) There are of course a few exceptions for art works as for wines that can integrate lately a DO as being recognised as pertaining to the corpus of an author.