

## Wine Diversity: Paradox or Economic Innovation?

G. Teil (SADAPT etc.) Le 11 mars 2022

Talk at the launching event for the release of the special wine issue of the *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*

Thanks for the invitation to contribute to this special issue and launching event.

⇒ 9'44 temps de lecture

[0'16] Just to make things clear, in this presentation, like in the article, I use the word 'wine-grower' to translate the French 'vigneron'. A 'vigneron' is both a vine-grower and a wine-maker. The neologism 'wine-grower' is a sort of contraction of both activities.

### Introduction [1'12]

This new issue is an invitation to reflect on sociology and wine and the opportunity of establishing a particular research subfield for sociology: wine.

Subfield sociologies often relate to a particular ethical point of view. They aim at better integration or equality for disabled, women, LGBT, or working people.

My interest in wine is in no way fueled by any kind of wine promotion.

I am interested in wine because it shows some unique features compared with other food products.

One of these unique features is the very high number of different products on the wine market.

My contribution to special issue tries to understand to which particular market organization this can be due.

To answer the question, I propose to dive into a longstanding dispute about wine Protected Denominations of Origin PDOs.

But this dispute has nothing to do with economics' critique of PDOs. It is a conflict amongst the wine-growers of the same PDOs.

## Tpt 1. Field of study: a dispute on PDO regulations [2'37]

PDO's regulation includes two sorts of constraints:

- first, on the allowed production means;
- second, on the taste of the resulting product, which must comply with a particular "typical" identity.

The value of PDO wines is not like a fixed automatic annuity. It fluctuates over time and sometimes drops down.

Wine-growers usually interpret such dropping down as due to a sort of laxity or weakening of the strength of their PDO sign.

They thus ask for a reinforcement of its regulation.

The interesting point here is that the strengthening of the regulation, to which Wine-growers unanimously aspire, is the source of a conflict regarding the good ways to achieve it.

The dispute is frequently interpreted as resulting from power struggles between big and small farmers, dominant or dominated wine-growers.

→ Yet increased scrutiny on the conflict suggests another explanation

For one group of wine-growers, a PDO is a quality sign that "informs" the customer about a product's quality.

- ⇒ To be efficient, this information must be precise and verifiable.
  - In Alsace, for instance, they want to define the typical taste of Alsace wines as "dry, brisk and fresh."
- ⇒ However, this tightening of the resulting quality requires **alleviating the constraints on the production means**, to keep able to meet the typical quality even in bad vintages.

→ The opponents to these wine-growers ask for just the reverse.

- ⇒ They see quality as the result of a commitment and search for quality by skilled wine-growers
  - They request to restrict more strictly the allowed corrective techniques. Skilled professionals do not need to resort to corrections such as sugar or acid addition to compensate for poor grape quality.
- ⇒ Simultaneously, since quality is the result of wine-growers creative search, it cannot be a priori restricted by what they denounce as customer-driven quality criteria

**In brief, the firsts blame the seconds for blurring the wine identities, and reciprocally the seconds accuse the firsts of subjugating quality to the customers' changing fads.**

→ These two understandings of quality feed two different marketing regimes.

## Tpt 2. A standard marketing regime [1'33]

The first regime consists in stabilizing an attachment between a product and consumers.

You will find it in any marketing book.

In our case, it requires objectifying the tastes of the product and of the consumer and trying to maintain their attachment as long as possible. Hence the demand for a more explicit typical taste of the product.

But some consumers resist this operation.

⇒ They have “no tastes”. One often hears them saying: “I like everything that’s good!”.

Similarly, for them, wines have no definite qualities. “Ask them: do you think Bordeaux or Alsace wines be good ones?” They will answer: “it depends”... on the wine, the producer, the vintage, the occasion, the tasting itself...

These drinkers, which I call ‘amateurs’, are engaged in wine exploration. Their tastes are changing and even eroding.

This does not mean that the large quantities of wine they drink lead to the destruction of their olfactory and gustatory senses.

Not at all.

### **What gets eroded is tastes as**

- intrinsic or stable definitions of the wine quality

*or*

- as a specification of the drinkers’ preferences and expectations

That’s why they do not respond to the previous standard stabilization and fuel an alternative process instead.

## Tpt 3. A process of unstabilization of the goods [36”]

This alternative process feeds on tasteless and curious amateurs and constant renewal of the supply.

The development of the alternative marketing regime associated with this particular unstabilization process helps understand the similarities of the wine market with the art market<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There is still an important difference: the regulation which imposes limits on the existence of wine. In contrast, artworks can revisit art without limit (this was particularly intensive in the ’50s & ’60s see the article by Nathalie Heinich<sup>1</sup>)

#### Tpt 4. Back to sociology & wine [1'11]

I hope this study

- ⇒ feeds the socio-economic analysis of the goods markets
- ⇒ suggests an alternative interpretation for the “artification” process said occurring in the wine field<sup>2</sup>.

If it does, it definitely contributes to sociology *from* wine.

But, it can also bring another contribution, not to researchers, to the actors.

- The situation I have investigated is conflictive. Each group of wine-growers more or less openly asks for a regulation that gets them rid of the other group.
- The present study proposes a particular understanding of why it is conflictive, which also leads to questioning the opportunity of such a separation of both marketing regimes.

➔ However, the answer to this last question cannot rest on the shoulders of researchers alone.

To go further this sociological work requires blurring the usual differentiation between the actors and the researcher.

For this reason, I suggest that this study is also a study *IN* wine.

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<sup>2</sup> Described as the ultimate stage of a competition for social distinction

## Tpt 5. Sociology *in* wine: with the actors of wine-world [27'+28'+1'35=2'30]

### 1. Pragmatic study *in* wine

What is a study *IN* wine?

- It is a work with the actors - it studies the activities, in the broadest sense, of all actors concerned by the point under study;
- it is, as noticed by Ho, attentive to the particular ways actors relate to wine (though the word 'culture' may be a bit restrictive, in this respect).

### 2. Multidisciplinary

Since it studies the activities of the actors in link with a particular point, topic, question, issue, **it is multidisciplinary.**

When you 'follow' the actors, as we say, you continuously switch from economics to consumption anthropology, to viticulture, to esthetics, to geography, to family studies, to ethics, and so on.

→ The actor's activity does not part according to scientific disciplines.

### 3. Critique

Pragmatic studies allow for a particular tuning of the hermeneutic distance to adopt in the face of actors' narratives.

⇒ It does not stick to the actor's accounts, nor *a priori* distrust them

One main interest of the particular pragmatic grounding is that it allows overcoming the gap between heterogeneous worlds such as true and non-true worlds; different cultures; art and non-art worlds; (even scientific disciplines)

Therefore, it allows for better inclusion of the actors into research that is not only during the fieldwork phase but also the discussion of the results.

⇒ A report is good if it helps the actors situate their actions, decisions, and objectives within enlarged collective debates and discussions.

With your permission, I would like to go one step further:

⇒ A report is a good report if, for each actor associated with the study, it supports higher inclusiveness of the activities of others.

To conclude, what is the best way of considering sociology and wine? In, of, from, about?

I have emphasized the "in" in order to shed special light on the relations with the actors.

But all these ways of accounting are required and none should be forgotten.

And this could be the aim of **wine & human studies.**