

What Globalization Has Done to Wine

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Confronted with transformations in the global market, does French wine still define itself as a product of excellence? By examining the “crisis” of the French model, Marie-France Garcia-Parpet, a researcher at the INRA (*Institut national de la recherche agronomique*) and specialist of winemaking issues, here offers an indispensable study of the role played by struggles over classification in the construction of oenological values.

Under Review: Marie-France Garcia-Parpet, *Le Marché de l'excellence. Les Grands Crus à l'épreuve de la mondialisation*, Paris, Seuil, Collection Liber, 2009, 266 p., 20€.

Can one speak of a “French model” of wine production? How has this “model” reacted to the international dynamics that today drive the wine world? The social sciences regularly explore the question of a “French exception” in the sectors of social protection and culture. In this book, Marie-France Garcia-Parpet turns to consider a commercial realm located at the frontiers of the food-processing industry and artistic creation: the Grands crus market and its “institutionalized model of excellence” (p.14). Organized around the idea of “terroir”, this model has been called into question by the rise of new producer countries where wines are often marketed under the banner of the vine. Garcia-Parpet describes the penetration of vine-based classification into territories where they have up till now had little relevance. Above all, she offers a novel demonstration of the diverse interactions, connections and frictions between the various types of classification.

The author thus does justice to the variety of actors and points of view involved in the hierarchical framework of the market. Well-known in the field of economic sociology for an article on the social construction of a “perfect” market¹, Garcia-Parpet here presents a broader, if less familiar, body of research. Spanning a decade and several territories (Chinon, Languedoc, etc.), it draws upon three types of materials: ethnographic accounts, press articles and professional documents. Although the work brings together several articles published by the author in various journals (*Genèses*, *Ruralia*, *Cahiers lillois d'économie et sociologie*, *Cahiers d'économie et de sociologie rurales*) over the course of the past decade, it does not particularly read as a “collection” thanks to the skillful efforts that have been made to link up the ten chapters, which are themselves divided between three main parts.

The Traditional Legitimatization of Wine: Between Time and Terroir

The first part of Garcia-Parpet’s book presents the traditional principles for legitimizing fine wines in France. As a product, wine is first of all characterized by a relationship to time that is constitutive of its distinctive value. The length of the apprenticeship necessary to knowing it, the filial transmission of wines and their appreciation, the importance accorded tradition and “lineage” in processes of elaboration and valorization, the potential improvement of wines in the course of aging and the social role of vintages and their memory in the qualification of moments of existence all contribute to making the product “wine” part of a long-term symbolic system. Faithful to the teachings of Pierre Bourdieu’s *La Distinction*, Garcia-Parpet sees this temporal anchorage as characteristic of bourgeois consumption: “The purchase of wine,” she writes, “is inextricably tied to strategies for presenting the self or the familial or political groups to which the individual belongs at the same time that it offers a possibility for profit” (p. 53). These are broad strokes, to be sure. The sworn enemies of Bourdieusian utilitarianism would likely criticize this tendency to reduce the pleasures and passions of wine to the status of epiphenomena masking strategies of distinction. Yet by varying the

¹ In particular, exploring the case of the Fontaine-en-Sologne strawberry market, she shows the role of actors – referred to as “economicity entrepreneurs” – in the emergence of a market model in keeping with the neoclassical representation. This article is probably one of the most frequently cited in the field of French economic sociology. Marie-France Garcia-Parpet, “La construction sociale d’un marché parfait: le marché au cadran de Fontaine-en-Sologne”, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, no.65, 1986.

social profiles of consumers, Garcia-Parpet avoids falling into the trap of a determinist discourse of the type “wine: a bourgeois product”. The distinguished middle-aged bourgeois is, it is true, the ideal-typical figure of the fine wine connoisseur but other examples are called upon, characterized by other uses and modes of wine consumption. These other connoisseurs, particularly those characterized by “humble” origins or a “low income”, do not receive systematic stylized portraits but rather serve as corrective (or paradoxical?) examples vis-à-vis the epistemologically dominant figure of the bourgeois connoisseur.

Wine is next defined by its territorial anchorage, principally through the AOC system (*appellations d'origine contrôlée*) that is maintained by the INAO (*Institut national des appellations d'origine*) and the appellation unions. Garcia-Parpet thus draws on the example of the Chinon appellation, which was symbolically and legally constructed around a “challenger” identity vis-à-vis the great French appellations. The interest of this example resides not only in what it tells us about the mechanisms of inter-appellation competition but above all in what it says about the internal dynamics of the Chinon appellation, which are brought to light through a series of close-ups on the profiles of producers involved in managing ongoing transformations in a differentiated way. In particular, the author reconstructs the struggles between producers seeking to impose their criteria of qualitative legitimization. Two producer categories emerge from this: “atypical” producers (still called “enthusiasts” and “newcomers”), on the one hand, and “heirs”, on the other. This latter category brings together both “dominant” owners in the field, whose capital allows them to adapt their choices and investments to the evolution of the market, and producers who have inherited traditional criteria of quality definition and often struggle to cope with the new economic context. Recalling the strategies of “subversion” and “conservation” described by Bourdieu and Delsaut in relation to the field of fashion, these categories are distinguished by antagonistic productive and commercial strategies, with the heirs portrayed as being more “traditionalist” and the newcomers portrayed as “subversive”. These two types of strategy are not, it is claimed, equivalent from the point of view of economic efficiency: “In the Chinon appellation, strategies of subversion (all relative) are more effective than

strategies for maintaining the status quo” (p.103). This diversity of productive strategies allows the *appellation d’origine contrôlée* to be seen as more than a simple perk for the producers affiliated with it. Indeed, it reveals a diversity of subjective relationships vis-à-vis the AOC, which is simultaneously a tool for collective promotion, an object of individual and collective controversy and a “framework” authorizing productive transformations.

Policies for valorizing wines and conflicts over classification are embodied in singular places and events. Garcia-Parpet’s ethnography of the professional fair for Loire wines quite shrewdly portrays the fair’s role in the symbolic construction of a territory and its actors. In addition to bringing preexistent supply and demand together, “the fair has a significant role in the representation and institutionalization of the market as well as its novelties, traditions and legitimate practices” (p. 110). Garcia-Parpet does not confine herself to describing the fair’s spatial configuration and commercial interactions; she also situates it in the symbolic space of the various international wine fairs. She interprets the image of fair conviviality championed by exhibitors as a way of “making a virtue of necessity” (p. 112) – that is, as an internalization of the fair’s symbolic and economic subordination relative to the London fair and Bordeaux’s “Vinexpo”, which are described as “dominant”.

The Globalization of Wine through Its Actors

The second part of the book looks beyond the frontiers of the hexagon in order to consider “other wine worlds”. In contrast to the first part, however, this is more a matter of data “framing” than of presenting research. The author begins by presenting the logic of American wineries, mulling over the history of the most reputed among them and insisting on their volume-driven strategies. In addition to the Gallo brothers saga², Garcia-Parpet retraces the efforts made by French winemaking groups to create a place for themselves in the Californian winemaking industry, recounting the history of the best known partnerships (that of Robert Mondavi and Baron Philippe de Rothschild, in

² The sons of Italian immigrants, the Gallo brothers created the first large American winery in 1933 and today head the largest winemaking business in the world, representing 3240 hectares of vineyard. As Garcia-Parpet writes, for many Americans, “Gallo is wine” (p.128).

particular). More generally, foreign investment – not just in the United States but in Chili, Australia and South Africa as well – has increased in recent decades, with what the author seems to regard as unfortunate consequences. Drawing on “macro-winemaking” figures to describe the spread of multinationals to these various countries, she writes that “the presence of these foreign businesses led to the disappearance of many small independent producers and of the cooperatives that produced local wines” (p. 14). As it is presented here, the globalization of wine has been defined not only by growth in imports and exports but also by changes in the organization of work within businesses (e.g., the growing importance of flying winemakers) and a transformation in inter-business relations due to the multiplication of mergers and stock listings that began in the 1990s. Garcia-Parpet also notes a form of “mixing of traditions” (p. 145), underscoring the fact that, within the United States and other “New World” countries, geographic origin is increasingly specified by productions that lay claim to oenological excellence.

Garcia-Parpet also shifts attention to transformations in wine consumption at the level of France and the world, underscoring the reduced consumption of traditional wine-producing countries and its growth in non-traditional markets. In addition to quantitative growth, she notes the spread of new ways of wine drinking, from “wine as a drink” present on workers’ tables to “wine as culture”, the festive and hedonistic uses of which are to be found among the “privileged bourgeoisie” (p. 163) as well as the middle classes.

The demand for fine wines did not develop in an autonomous fashion but was rather fed by the emergence of new media outlets. Garcia-Parpet thus explains how wine-tasting – up till then reserved for marketing purposes – came to acquire an aesthetic dimension with the emergence of gastronomic societies in the inter-war years. This phenomenon accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s with the development of an over-abundant and diversified supply of oenological advice. The appearance of this new prescriptive literature was not simply a reflection of consumers’ imperfect knowledge. According to Garcia-Parpet, the phenomenon is rather explained by reference to “the fact that the social agents capable of constituting demand for it had the dispositions necessary for delegating certain acts of knowledge, assessment and even judgment – in a word, they

were prepared to let standards be imposed upon them” (p. 168). In this connection, Garcia-Parpet further observes that “a result of the logic of homologies is that works of prescription are adjusted to the expectations of the public” (p. 175). Beyond this dialectic between prescription and consumption, the authors of prescriptive literature are also studied by reference to the internal competition driving them, their relations with the world of production and their effects on the relevant wine hierarchies. With the rise of Anglo-Saxon criticism, in particular, Garcia-Parpet sees evidence of the erosion of the quality system embodied by the AOC.

Newcomers and Qualitative Conversion: The Case of Languedoc-Roussillon

The third and last part of Garcia-Parpet’s book is devoted to a privileged figure among producers who has already been mentioned in the case of the Chinon appellation: the “newcomer”. According to the author, these actors contribute to redefining the principles of wine legitimization and to reconfiguring the social morphology of producers. Garcia-Parpet thus explains how Languedoc-Roussillon moved from the image of a “wine factory” to that of a “pioneering region” thanks to the activities of an “incomparable producer” (p. 194), Aimé Guibert, and an ambitious industrialist, Robert Skalli. While the personal and productive trajectories of these two men are precisely described, their reputation within the world of production is unfortunately left empirically unexplored. Indeed, the professional legitimacy of economic actors is not solely based on their trajectories, discourses of legitimization and media backing but also on the overlapping representations endogenous to the world of production.

By contrast, Garcia-Parpet is alert to the consequences of qualitative transformations for increased social differentiation in the world of production. The author very clearly presents the dilemmas facing “mass winemakers” whose criteria of wine production and evaluation (“the kilo-degree”) no longer correspond to the evolution of the market and for whom qualitative reconversion is often financially and symbolically tricky. Unlike large groups, moreover, which have an easier time coming to terms with the consequences of these investments, productive singularization poses a number of political and professional problems for producers who are tempted by the “qualitative

revolution” and the withdrawal from cooperatives. These developments concerning tensions between individual initiatives and social norms are particularly interesting in a political context in which individual responsibility and entrepreneurial liberty are constantly being celebrated.

In sum, Garcia-Parpet’s book is in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the economy, where classification struggles are regarded as a privileged point of entry for examining the mechanisms of competition. Most of the concepts she employs are borrowed from Boudieusian terminology (that of the field, dominant/dominated groups, the habitus, lifestyles, the notion of homology, etc.), though they are sometimes complemented with more recent findings, such as Neil Fligstein’s notion of “conception of control”. But the contribution of this research is not to be found in the way in which it draws upon recent work in economic or “winemaking” sociology. Indeed, this work is rarely discussed in any sustained way. Indeed, some references are strangely absent despite their proximity to the author’s approach (here, one thinks in particular of Mary Douglas³ and Wei Zhao’s⁴ analyses of wine classifications). Nor is the interest of the book to be found in a possible sociological solution to the present crisis. In addition to the wealth of information it supplies concerning rarely studied regions (Chinon), this book’s merit derives from its geographically variable approach to globalization and classification dynamics. Garcia-Parpet offers an analysis of “globalization” that goes beyond its habitual use as a “‘carry-all’ notion that hardly allows one to know which real transformations of commercial networks are thereby designated” (p.21). Even if her study does not cover all producer or consumer countries, its focus on the French case is not geographically cloistered. In examining the experience of winemakers at the national level, Garcia-Parpet’s research latches on to forms of competition and institutional dynamics that are inseparable from an international context. Further, her choice of terrain nicely illustrates the forms taken by classification principle hybridization among French and foreign wines. Finally, the manner in which the author draws upon general data

³ Mary Douglas, “Comment les nomenclatures changent. Des vins et des tissus », in *Comment pensent les institutions*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999.

⁴ Wei Zhao, “Understanding Classifications: Empirical Evidence from the American and French Wine Industries”, *Poetics*, 33, 2005, p.179-200.

concerning foreign modes of winemaking helps us better understand ongoing developments in France. Yet, while Garcia-Parpet's choice of terrain proves fruitful in reconstructing the dynamics of the French winemaking field, the supposedly "dominant" part of the French system of valorization (Bordelais and Bourgogne) unfortunately receives inadequate attention. Often described as conservative and "bourgeois" regions, they are themselves heterogenous, dynamic and open to oenological controversy.

Translated from french by **Ethan Rundell**

Further Reading

- An article (available free of charge at Persée) by Marie-France Garcia-Parpet, "La construction sociale d'un marché parfait: le marché au cadran de Fontaine-en-Sologne" *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, no.65, 1986.
- An article (access reserved to subscribers at Cairn) by Marie-France Garcia-Parpet, "Mondialisation et transformations du monde viticole: processus de reclassement des vins du Languedoc-Roussillon", *Sociétés contemporaines*, no.68, 2007/4.
- Special number of the journal *Anthropology of Food*, no.3, December 2004, devoted to "Wine and Globalization".

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