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THE VILE AND THE NOBLE: On the Relation between Natural and Social Classifications in the French Wine World[1]

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This article examines the concept of *terroir*—a French word that captures the correspondence between the physical and human features of a place and the character of its agricultural products. Tied to the protection of economic rents threatened by competition and fraud, the practice of classifying certain lands, grapes, and properties both substantively and qualitatively has become the organizing principle of the entire French wine industry. Often derided as snobbish monopolistic practices by New World producers, the notion *terroir* in France and its rejection in America both exemplify how the "principles of vision and division" of the natural world are always intertwined with the "principles of vision and division" of the social world. The present article discusses these affinities through an analysis of wine classifications in the French regions of Bordeaux and Burgundy, and some of the critiques they have given rise to, in the United States especially.

INTRODUCTION

Nowhere, perhaps, is the social order more visible than in the way people organize, use, and talk about the natural landscape—how it is appropriated, exploited, and made sense of (Bell 1994). And there are few places where this relation is more revealing than in the cultivation of wine. Thus, it may not be exaggerated to argue that the entire social history of France is condensed in the trajectory and organization of its viticulture. Not only that: The social and economic history of different French regions—I will discuss primarily Bordeaux and Burgundy here—may be read in their different ways of managing the relationship between physical terrain and the cultural imaginary of wine.

This, of course, is not a particularly novel point. Sociologists have long argued that objectively perceived resemblances between the human and the nonhuman world (or what anthropologists call totemic practices) say more about the people doing the classifying than about the objects being classified. Thus, people imagine the natural world through the lens of their familiar patterns of social organization (Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Lévi-Strauss 1963; Douglas 1986) and through the dynamic of human interests and class relations, crystallized over long periods of time (Bell 1980; Williams 1980; Cronon 1991). Scientists themselves, whose raison d'être often lies in the presumption

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of an abstract and self-standing nature, are not immune to these logics: All kinds of vernacular considerations find their way into scientific classifications and theories, even as science constantly aims at their denegation and suppression (Latour 1993; Ritvo 1997).[2]

The inseparability of nature and culture finds an especially intriguing expression in the way human beings relate to a celebrated joint product of both: wine. For one thing, it is demonstrably difficult for people—even wine experts—to recognize the natural origins of wines through sight, taste, and smell and even more difficult for them to agree on quality rankings. Still, and in spite of the deeply subjective nature of personal taste and preferences, wine has this particularity that it elicits strong beliefs about value. The gustatory properties of wines are understood to entertain both horizontal (differentiation) and vertical (hierarchy) relations to one another. On the one hand, connoisseurs agree that wines taste very differently from one another, depending on grape varieties and blending, region, climate, vintage, viticultural practices, etc. On the other hand, a small number of wines (and specifically old, rare bottles) elicit extraordinary deference and fetch stratospheric prices.[3] And since the economic and symbolic consequences of these "judgments of worth" are substantial, competition naturally rages over the human processes that produce them.

The present article explains the cultural and institutional rules that govern wine competition in France, analyzing the origin and development of wine labeling and status-ordering over the last two centuries. I focus on the specific ways in which the French have enrolled natural elements (plants, soils, climates) to ground their competitive claims firmly into finely parceled out territory. On the one hand, the organized defense of place names (the "authenticating origins" of wines as Colman 2008 puts it), which is the main principle structuring the fine wines market in France, appears to closely reflect the historical dynamics of economic interests it is a legal device crafted by powerful agents to create and control economic niches by obtaining special designations for their land. On the other hand, it is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle economic advantage from its symbolic projections—including the presence of a powerful and deeply shared natural cosmology backed by the ongoing mobilization of science and history. It is through this mobilization, always contested but nevertheless sedimented over centuries, that social distinctions between people have been transfigured into natural classifications between things—plants, parcels of lands, villages, and regions. One only needs to pay a bit of attention to the critique of the French territorial logic by American wine upstarts (something this article engages in toward the end) to understand how alien these claims may be to people operating in a different political culture.

THE *TERROIR* LOGIC, OR THE PATRIMONIALIZATION OF FRANCE

Over the last century and a half or so, the French have elaborated a remarkable concept, *terroir*, to capture the correspondence between the physical features of a place—the soil and slope of a vineyard, the local climate, and the blend of grapes—and

the character of its final products, often mediated by human experience accumulated over centuries, such as agricultural know-how, tried-out processes of viniculture, and local traditions more generally. Geographers, geologists, and botanists have offered their science, but also their most lyrical pen, to back up the theory that great wines come from great *terroirs* and that great *terroirs* are made of—but also make—great people. In some places nature was generous and nourishing, and yielded noble cultures for both plants and humans. Thus, France's most prominent geographer, Vidal de la Blache, could write about Burgundy in 1903 that the "nutritious substances of the *terroirs* . . . communicate a tasty vigor to plants, which passes on to men and animals."[4] In other places nature was coarse and hostile, and the vine did not grow; or it was too generous and easy, or tended by unsophisticated people: The resulting wines were then thought to be ordinary. From the 19th century until well into the 1980s, the region of Languedoc in the South of France belonged to the latter category with its prolific land, periodic overproduction, and rebellious small *vignerons*.

This suggests that representations about the quality of land had less lofty origins, too. Many commentators have rightly argued that the history of wine in France is a history about rents and monopolistic practices (which, after all and if we believe Joseph Schumpeter [2008], is also the history of capitalism). The habit of identifying wine by its geographic origins is very old (Loubère 1990). In France, producers in high-prestige regions, whose wines commanded the highest prices, have been fighting a battle to protect their commercial advantages against the large volumes of wines pouring out of lower-prestige regions since at least the Middle Ages (Hinnewinkel 2004; Colman 2008). But the systematization and use of local names in commercial practices is more recent, probably corresponding to a new form of self-protection in an increasingly open economy. Labbé (2011) situates the beginning of the movement in the 1740s—this is when he identifies a shift from the generic denomination of Beaune (the main commercial city in Burgundy) to that of individual villages in commercial sales; the first organized defense of place names takes place in 1766.

The rigid system of geographically based qualifications that is characteristic of the *terroir* logic thus progressively emerged out of deeply political conflicts over the economic advantages to be derived from the commerce of wine. As Mary Douglas (1986:106) puts it, "like the cloth guilds, [the name] is a monopolistic institution to protect the producer. It belongs to a system of customs and excise controls." The development of *terroir* monopolies in the 20th century involved struggles to limit the circulation of grapes across wine-growing areas; a movement to standardize viticultural processes and monitor quality, to fend off criticisms about adulteration and fraud; and the protection of brands of geographical origin through the development of special classificatory and ranking devices that seemingly anchored status hierarchies firmly into the natural world.

The 1855 Classification—Bordeaux

The infamous 1855 classification of Médoc wines is perhaps the best known of these devices. It was proposed by the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce in its effort to

select wines for the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris (the wines were to be featured as exemplars of France's advances in manufacturing and agriculture). Relying on divisions widely in use in the Bordeaux wine trade, the chamber singled out 57 wines and gave them the label of *crus classés*. In a separate category below the *crus classés* were the *crus bourgeois*, which were themselves distinguished from ordinary wines. The *crus classés* were also further differentiated from one another by their position in a hierarchy of five divisions (first, second, third, fourth, or fifth *crus* or *growths*). Not even a century after the French Revolution, old regime social distinctions (between nobles—or, rather, bourgeois with aristocratic pretensions—regular bourgeois, and commoners;[5] and a further hierarchy of ranks within the *classé* group, much like intranobility distinctions) seemed like the only conceivable way to make sense of, and frame quality in the French context.

The French categorical (rather than continuous) approach to rankings ("*classements*") in wine as elsewhere (think the *Michelin Guide*, with its stars-based evaluation of restaurants) and its particular shape (positions within rankings are very stable over time) thus have obvious social origins. The transparent vocabulary of Médoc rankings (with the *crus classés*, *crus bourgeois*, and *crus paysans*) was all the more remarkable since the arrangement, which also produced similar rankings for the Sauternes and Barsac regions and was later emulated throughout the Gironde, was the result of a contingent historical settlement. In its effort to use a politically neutral selection tool and remain consistent with already existing classificatory efforts, the chamber had pragmatically used historical records of wine prices as its main criterion for categorizing the *châteaux*, a common practice in the wine business.[6] It was a commercial and marketing operation, well in line with established brokers' practices; as such, it was neither momentous nor intended to last (Markham 1998:106–107). However, rankings have this particularity that they become institutionalized through the practices of people who treat them as objective realities (Espeland and Sauder 2007) and through the interests they elicit on the part of the classified. In principle nothing prevents classificatory schemes and rankings to evolve over time, especially since periodic evaluations of these schemes involve tasting by an expert committee. In practice, however, these revisions have been largely meaningless and the rankings have remained mostly immovable, owing to the continued market power of retailers in Bordeaux (who used the classification as an easily recognizable categorical framework for selling wines abroad), the reputational control wrought by the bearers of the high-prestige classifications, and the general acceptance of long established positions by the rank and file.[7] In 1949, when the law set out to link the use of the term *cru classé* to the 1855 classification (Markham 1998:177), it merely put a formal stamp on a matter long settled by habit and common practice.

Enter the appellations d'origine controlée (AOC) System—Burgundy

The second "status anchoring" device was the creation of the AOC system (or designated origin appellations), by which place names became formally recognized as the

primary labeling process for wines (as opposed to, for instance, grape) and *terroir* acquired both a legal definition and a more positive connotation. Officially formalized in 1935 (but with important antecedents in 1905 and 1919), the AOCs were the result of a dual development: first, the central government's attempt to control the quality of agricultural products, which was the source of growing public concerns since the middle of the 19th century and gave rise to a flourish of sanitary legislation in the 1900s (Stanziani 2005); and a series of grassroot movements among syndicates of property owners, led by their wealthiest representatives (notably the owners of *grands crus* vineyards. These movements spearheaded a reorganization of the local industry against the commercial power of the small number of wine brokers (*négociants*) who had come to dominate it, particularly in Burgundy (Laferté 2006; Jacquet 2009).[8] Even more concretely, the AOC system of protecting place reputations through the principle of the primacy of origin and the development of local quality charters (against the *négociants*' strategy of developing private brands irrespective of the origins of grapes) came about as the fruit of a realignment of rural politics and involved a prolonged, "republican" battle between small and larger property owners backed by radical and socialist representatives and, on the other side, a few capitalist businesses with conservative political allies.

The AOC system also called for a strict geographical definition of the "high-quality" wine production areas, sometimes (as in Burgundy) down to very small land tracts; it rigorously regulated the vine varietals, viticultural techniques (e.g., spacing of vines, pruning methods) and wine-making processes that could be used within them (Unwin 1996:315–16). To this day, localities have to follow a long and arduous process of certification with a national committee to be recognized as an AOC (e.g., see Colman 2008 on the construction of the Pessac-Leognan appellation in Bordeaux). This includes collectively organizing local producers into a syndicate, providing evidence of historical reputation, and demonstrating a product's typicity and its relationship to the natural and human factors of the *terroir* (Barham 2003). Producers within the *terroir* have to conform strictly to the AOC rules if they want to be able to claim the label (and they have little reason not to do so, given the enormous commercial rents associated with the AOC). In that sense the AOC labels have a performative dimension (Callon 1998), ensuring not only the homogenization and continuity of techniques within them but also the continuous elaboration of local reputations, traditions, images, and even flavor styles (wines have to be tested—i.e., tasted—for typicity). Finally, the institutionalization of *terroir* as the most important marker of wine evolved hand in hand, and furthermore stimulated, an elite-driven folklorist and traditionalist revival throughout France, with Burgundy leading the way in the 1930s through the creation of gastronomical societies and bacchic fraternal associations (Laferté 2006, 2012; Whalen 2007). Gade (2004) aptly describes this process as a sort of "patrimonialization" of wine—indeed the whole region of Burgundy is hard at work today to have its special human-shaped landscape recognized as a unique cultural site of universal human value, worthy of a UNESCO World Heritage designation.

SOCIAL DISTINCTION INTO NATURAL CLASSIFICATION

Even the INAO—the French National Institute of Origin Appellations or the public sector, but producer-dominated organization that regulates the AOCs—today defines *terroir* as "a social construction, concerning a natural space with homogeneous features, which is legally defined and characterized by a set of values: aesthetic value linked to landscape, cultural value linked to historical evocation, patrimonial value linked to social attachment, media value linked to notoriety" (INAO, cited in Hinnewinkel 2004:6, author's translation). But as W. I. Thomas (2002) argued long ago, all social constructions, particularly when they have behind them the force of the law, are real in their effects, aligning individual interests in some ways (but not others), sustaining some kinds of rationalizations, practices, and beliefs (but not others) and benefiting some kinds of people (but not others).

Noble Plants

The distinction of people is intertwined with the distinction of lands and even plants in complex ways. While the specific organization of the territorial base may vary across regions, the territorialization, or geographic entrenchment, of status distinctions remains the one constant feature of the French system (Douglas 1986; Zhao 2005). Given the very long history of French viticulture, particularly in the Burgundy area, it is difficult to identify a point of origin for these distinctions. But there have certainly been moments of crystallization. Throughout history certain men, or group of men, have found themselves in a position to dignify or vilify elements of nature depending on their relationship with them. In 1395, Philippe-le-Hardi, Duke of Burgundy, famously ordered the uprooting of the "vile and very disloyal" *Gaamez* vines (today's Gamay), "from which comes a great abundance of wine" (cited in Lavalle 1855:38). Gamay grapes were mostly grown by commoners who were also accused to use manure and other filthy fertilizers in their fields (and ordinances were passed to outlaw these practices as well, at least when it came to fine plants); more importantly, the grapes' high productivity threatened the cultivation of the more delicate *pinots noirs*, which constituted the main source of the *duché*'s wine supply. As such, they represented a danger for the economic survival of the region and especially threatened its wealthiest growers, who were invested primarily in the "finer" and hard-to-grow pinot varietals.

Gamay was thus exiled to Beaujolais, where it has flourished ever since. But the struggle between noble and ignoble plants continued for centuries in the Côte d'Or, with periodic local ordinances to "extirpate" the latter, supported by arguments about health dangers, frequency of fraud, and unrefined flavor. Writing in 1855, for instance, Lavalle deplores the fact that *gamet* (gamay) vines and the lower varieties of pinot have "invaded" hilltops and flatlands all around: "God knows how awfully active the vulgar plant has been in driving away the fine plant, and what progress it makes every day! Our ancestors would have been appalled!" (p. 46).[9] His authoritative categorization of the "great wines of the Gold Coast" only considers vineyards of "fine plants" (such as classic pinot noir, pinot blanc, and chardonnay), other varietals being again characterized as "common," "ordinary," "vulgar," and therefore not worth reviewing. Being at the

bottom of the hierarchy, the "disadvantaged [or disowned] communes" (*les communes déshéritées*—see Peyre 1935) that cultivate these varietals barely get a mention in Lavalle's survey or other surveys of the same period. In the 1920s, Laneyrie (1926), a broker in Burgundy, reacted to this situation and denounced the sharpening of social distinctions that, he argued, accompanied the origin appellation movement: "[the wines produced by the "not fine" plants are] innumerable, and will bear no right to an appellation, since they are unworthy [*indignes*]; they are to wines what the untouchables are to people in India" (p. 36). He wrote with some trepidation and verve, but he did not prevail: Perpetuated through studies aimed for the general reader, popular beliefs, and institutional and scientific elaboration, these long historical distinctions were formally certified by the nascent AOC system. In 1930 pinot noir was legally defined as Burgundy's "noble grape," while the low-caste gamay and other grapes could only bear the appellation Bourgogne in the Beaujolais region (Hansen 1995:174; Jacquet 2009).

Noble Lands

Historical statistics going as far back as 1635 (e.g., in Labbé 2011) show that the price of gamay wines was always lower than that of pinot, although the sharp disconnect between the two really began only toward the end of the 17th century. Price distinctions among pinot producers could be quite substantial, too, depending on the commune or the producer. The local "experts" who sought to classify the Côte d'Or vineyards by quality were well acquainted with these facts of course:

Price differences, then, were always the standard that established differences in quality between wines. Lavalle's 1855 classification of pinot production in Côte d'Or into five hierarchically related classes (*tête de cuvée* [literally head of vintage] and then first, second, third, and fourth *cuvées*) relies on an exhaustive survey of available historical evidence on wine prices in each commune.[10] Drawing on his conversations with local "experts,"[11] Lavalle (1855) also offers a table of all the *climats* in the Côte d'Or in which "fine wine" (meaning wine that fetches a high price) is grown: These are small geographical areas that coincide with historical vineyards and habitually serve as a basis for the local population's perception of the organization of the landscape. With their boundaries often defined by old enclosure walls, the *climats* correspond to territorial divisions going back centuries. Since the 19th century, they have been increasingly assumed to have also relatively coherent geo-climatological personalities, so that the *terroir* they represent is as much a fact of nature as it is a fact of society. Knowledge of price and reputational differentials between grape varietals, communes, and vineyards provides important context to, for instance, Denis Morelot's (1831) suggestion that variations in the flavor of wine must come from geological variations in soil composition and to Alfred de Vergnette de Lamotte's (1846) scientific discussion that the combination of soil and vineyard altitude is the true secret of Burgundy's finest wines.

It is this framework—the identification of *climats* and the hierarchy of vineyards within them—that served as a basis for the "Statistical map of the vineyards producing

the great wines of Burgundy" commissioned by the agricultural committee in Beaune in 1861 (Comité d'agriculture de Beaune 1861). In this process of formal translation of local knowledge and social relations, the physical terrain in the Côte d'Or was parceled out into extraordinarily fine designations and status categories, sometimes down to the field level. The very long history of viticulture in the region and its fragmented property patterns produced a classification that was much more meticulous than in Bordeaux, with its large and more recent estates (Pitte 2008:xiii, talks about Burgundy's *micro-appellations* and *micro-vintages*). But the classification has endured because, just as in Bordeaux, it features the idea that the quality of a particular wine-producing unit (*climat* in Burgundy, *château* in Bordeaux) is natural (like social status was "natural"—i.e., inherited—during the old regime). The territorial hierarchies recognized in the mid-19th century and formalized by law in the 1930s after the creation of the AOCs have thus changed very little. The terms *tête de cuvée* or *première cuvée* were replaced by *grand cru*, the most elite designation within an official appellation; the next designation, *deuxième cuvée*, became *premier cru*, and the *troisième cuvée* in 1861 became the lowest designation within an appellation (*village*).

Economic distinctions are intertwined in a complex way with social and natural ones. Following Alfred de Vergnette de Lamotte's (1846:37) remark that the finest wines are produced at elevations "between 15 and 78 meters" above the plain, the localization of Burgundy's *grands crus* adheres to the local topography very closely (see Figure 1): the most prestigious appellations are all generally situated halfway down hillside slopes, where soils are neither too shallow nor too rich (since high yields are supposed to be bad for quality); they are often surrounded by the intermediary appellations on both sides; finally the lower-prestige appellations are in the flatlands. The map for the appellation Chambolle-Musigny in Figure 2 provides a good example of the logic at work here, exemplifying both the very fine topographic distinctions between *climats* (the vineyards or place names) and the firm anchoring of hierarchies in geography (again the *grands crus* cluster toward the upper side of the hill, but not all the way to the top).

The correspondence between territory, presumed quality, and reputation is thus very strict in Burgundy (and it does not overlap neatly with property, since most *climats* have multiple owners). The only ways to extend the purchasing power of a reputational label like a *climat* were traditionally to increase yields (and thus potentially lower quality) or mix in wine from lower-ranked parcels or low-prestige regions, but AOC rules made both practices illegal.[12] By contrast in Bordeaux, a region that characteristically was developed by British merchants and bourgeois traders, a particular *château*'s reputation extends to its newly acquired adjacent lands within the same appellation; property sizes are much greater and have also grown since the 19th century.[13] *Terroir* in Bordeaux is a malleable concept, coterminous with the boundaries of the *château*. In Burgundy it is not: The boundaries are fixed.[14] Thus, the principles by which territories inherit status vary across wine-growing regions and reflect their different trajectories into wine cultivation and trade, as well as their different histories of land ownership and class relations.

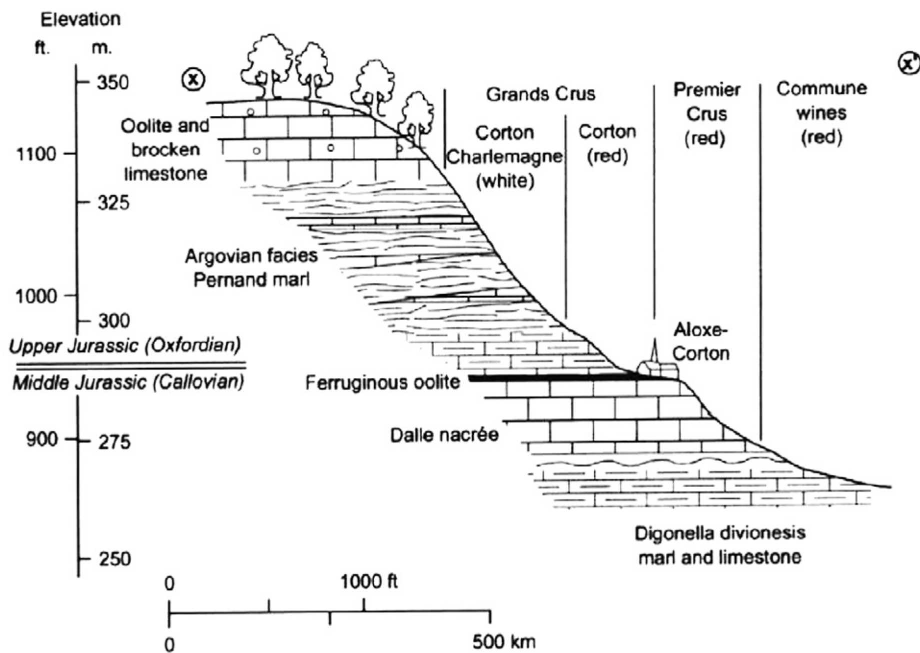

FIGURE 1. Schematic Representation of the Distribution of Burgundy Appellations in Relation to Slope and Soil Composition. Cross-Section of the Hill of Corton Showing the Relationship of Geology to Grand Crus/Premier Crus/Commune Designations. Source: Haynes (1999:192).

NATURAL CLASSIFICATIONS INTO SOCIAL DISTINCTIONS

After the 1930s, wine producers sought to incorporate the scientific arguments of geologists, geographers, and agronomists into the INAO's efforts to categorize the physical environment. But sociopolitical justifications never lurked very far beneath the surface of arguments emphasizing nature. The defense of "quality" was also articulated sociologically through the language of distinction and refinement and through associations with elite publics. As Markham (1998:210) suggests, it may not be entirely fortuitous that the properties that gave Bordeaux wines their reputation for quality in the 17th and 18th centuries all belonged to the richest and most highly regarded local bourgeois and aristocrats. Similarly, the legalization of origin appellations in the 1930s secured the already powerful economic advantages of the owners of the most desirable land parcels, who were also the most interested in defending "quality" standards—not only as a guarantee of future profits but also as a flattering reflection of their social position. Thus, it should come as no surprise that some of the highest-status wine producers in the country—a majority of them claiming a noble lineage—stood behind the 1935 AOC law: "the Marquis de Lur Saluces of Château d'Yquem [the highest ranked *cru* in Sauternes], the Baron Le Roy de Boiseaumarié of Château Fortia in Châteauneuf du Pape, and from Burgundy, the Marquis d'Angerville [of Volnay] and Henri Gouges

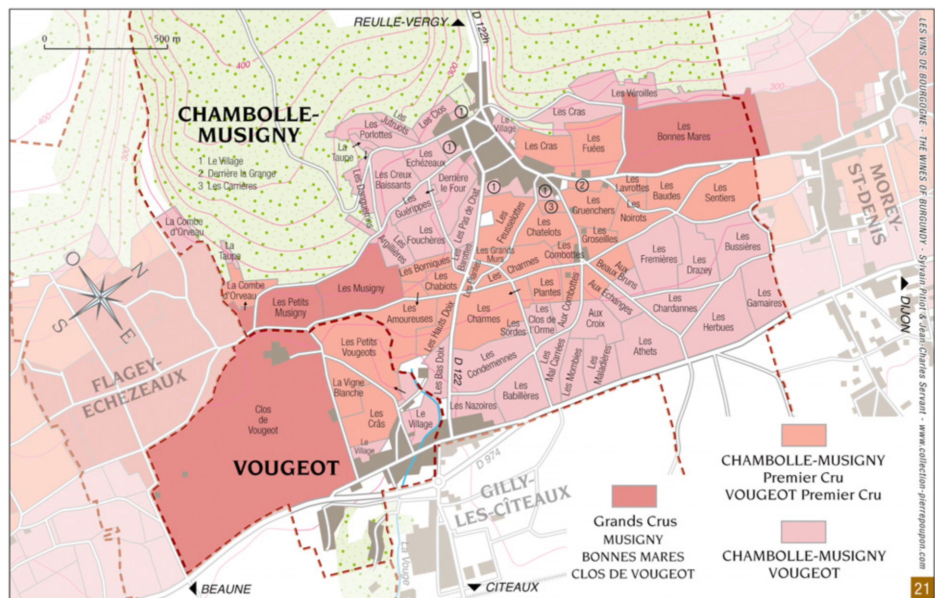

FIGURE 2. Map of the Chambolle-Musigny Vineyard, with Cru Classifications (darkest = grand cru [e.g., "les musigny"]; medium = premier cru [e.g., "les amoureuses"]; lightest = commune [e.g., "derrière le four"]). Note that some *climats* (place names) are split between two cru classifications (e.g.,"les cras," both in premier cru and in the village appelation). Source: Sylvain Pitiot et Pierre Poupon. 1999. *Nouvel Atlas des Vins de Bourgogne. Les villages de la Côte bourguignonne (états parcellaires: appellations, lieux-dits, superficies, propriétaires des grands crus)*. 2e vol (cartes). Collection Pierre Poupon. Reproduced by permission of the Collection Pierre Poupon.

[of Nuits Saint Georges]" (Hansen 1995:176). By embedding the *terroir* system into law through immutable classifications, the social status that certain land tracts had acquired through socially exclusive patterns of ownership and expensive modes of cultivation (the finer varieties of pinot require a lot more work from growers because the plants are crooked and yields are poor) became literally "naturalized," as if their claims to distinction came, first, from the blessings of nature and, second, from the fortunate situation of having enlightened and expert custodians. Importantly, more than 17 percent of appellations classified as *grands crus* or *premier crus* are *clos*—well-known historical properties surrounded by walls (Foucher 2010). One of the largest and most eminent appellations, the *Clos Vougeot*, covers an entire slope from top to bottom, even though the composition of soils varies substantially across the area in question, and the multiplicity of owners puts into question the homogeneity of viticultural practices within it. The fact that this used to be a monopolistic estate, with a long and distinguished history of winemaking at the hands of the Cistercian monks, later replaced by generations of wealthy wine merchants, may explain the coincidence between the (supposedly natural) boundaries of the *terroir* and those of the historical estate.

The logic of *terroir* is thus deeply historical, as well as economic and sociological. First, the history. As Roger Dion (1952) has pointed out, "what distinguished high quality wine-growing in the eyes of seventeenth or eighteenth century men was the fact that it was onerous. . . . Settling in sites that made the sale of products easier was a necessity if [this activity] aimed at a commercial profit" (p. 418). This gave an advantage to those locations that could reach large domestic or export markets—through maritime ports, rivers, or the proximity of urban centers—as well as those where owners of land could afford to invest heavily in quality. Bordeaux offers the perfect example of a viticultural region whose technological upgrading was driven by its preferential access to the sizeable (and wealthy) British and Dutch markets, as well as by its interactions with foreign knowledge and market demands (Dion 1959:421–29): the volume consumption of ordinary wines and spirits for the Dutch; the narrower focus of the British aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie on expensive wines (Enjalbert 1978:83–84). Says Enjalbert (1953:322) about Bordeaux: "the creation of quality vineyards was much more driven by the influence of importers than by the intrinsic qualities of *terroirs*." More constrained geographically by its lack of fluvial access (except in the South), Burgundy followed the second path of developing high-end wine knowledge and skills under the leadership of the wealthy Cistercian abbeys (the official suppliers of wine for the Avignon papacy) and the powerful dukes of Burgundy, who developed ties with Northern European courts and markets in the 14th and 15th centuries. This emphasis continued after the breakdown and resale, mostly to urban bourgeois and wealthy peasants, of church and noble lands during the French Revolution: With increasingly small properties, high quality, again, was a better economic bet. But it was an expensive one.

In both regions, good *terroirs*—*terroirs* producing wines deemed of high quality—were thus commercial and economic achievements as much as they were agronomical ones. In particular, they favored those who had the resources to spend on improving vine growing and wine-making techniques, as well as on sale and marketing: Dion (1952:422) discusses the drainage of the vineyard of Mr. de Pontac, owner of the famed Haut-Brion estate, at the end of the 17th century in the Graves region near Bordeaux as an example of the impact of finances on quality and standing. Through the circulation of economic capital, the reputation of a particular vineyard and, beneath it, of a particular *terroir*, could indeed become closely aligned with the socioeconomic characteristics of its owners.

Second, the economic logic. In the 20th century, the strongly hierarchical nature of the AOC system has helped maintain the equivalence between the distinction of people and the distinction of lands by turning privileged labels into powerful economic assets. As Moran (1993:699) remarks, "the structure is pyramid-like in shape, with less than 5 percent of vineyards with a right to appellation as *grand crus*."[15] Given the entrenchment of the labeling system in environmental determinations and the relative immutability of rankings, the possibility of a *déclassement* of a great wine is remote. According to a strict economic logic, this kind of monopoly over a captive clientele (the elite and elitist customers who buy according to label) may produce, in

time, a drop in quality and care—and many commentators believe it did, at least for a time. Critics may, for instance, point out that the low quality of French wines, including elite labels, was dramatically revealed by the infamous "judgment of Paris" that ranked California wines above French ones in a blind tasting in 1976 (Taber 2005). A major event in the renaissance of the California wine industry, it also elicited a collective gasp from the French wine aristocracy, now very obviously threatened by competition from abroad.

The fact is, however, that the symbolic monopolies established by the exclusive labels were never very secure to start with. Domestic threat was there from the beginning. Since its creation, the AOC system has evolved toward more, not less, inclusiveness. Between 1945 and 2002, the proportion of AOC wines in the French wine production went from 10 to 53.6 percent, with much of this growth taking place after the mid-1980s (Rousset 2004:303). Following a logic similar to what Tocqueville (1998:163) called "collective individualisms" (or demands for the protection of collectively owned but individually distinctive social markers), the number of appellations has proliferated, too: from about 50 in 1930, when the system was first formalized, to 200 in the mid-1960s (Teil 2010) and over 400 in 2009 (in 2011 the number of appellations was revised and came down slightly to 364).[16] Fortunately for the industry, these changes have been more than made up by the vast expansion, fueled by growing wealth at the top of society, of the public of wine connoisseurs and aficionados in France and abroad: from a primarily mass consumption product in the old world (France and Italy still have the highest consumption of wine per capita worldwide), wine has been reappropriated in the New World as a fashionable good—a social marker—(Garrier 2008; Garcia-Parpet 2009). Economically, then, the combination of increased competition for status and market share (in a situation of global decrease of world wine production)[17] has—as economists would have it—kept wine a contested business that constantly demands intrinsic proofs of distinction and achievement from producers. In other words, those who are at the pinnacle of the status hierarchy have to work hard and spend enormous amounts of money to maintain the belief that they are worthy of their rank in that hierarchy—including, often, by throwing away a large share of their production to keep their wine selective and rare (the temptation of fraud, however, remains ever present).

Third, the sociological logic: The fact is that elite producers are "sociologically" captive, too, through what Pierre Bourdieu (2005) calls the logic of homologies, or dispositional similarities between producers and clients. These homologies are produced through several different channels: regulatory coercion, the *habitus* of clients, and the *habitus* of producers. First, the highest-ranked labels are subject to more stringent controls than their lower-ranked peers, with yield and overall production limits, strict rules pertaining to the vineyard architecture, pruning, and vat aging (Rousset 2004). Second, these vineyards cater to a clientele of connoisseurs who—through long processes of habituation and training—take pride in mastering the complexities of the French culture of *terroir* and in picking wine coming from the right plots of land (and certainly Burgundy, with its intricate classifications, requires that kind of involved

commitment). If social context does indeed objectively structure sensory experience (and thus *taste*) (Bourdieu 1984), then wine will be appreciated through different sensory lenses and for different "intellectual" reasons in different social milieus and contexts—with *terroir* knowledge and appreciation playing an especially significant role in France (in contrast to, for instance, the cultivation of brand identity and the extolling of wine-making science or individual creativity in the United States). Thus countless books, guides, and specialized reviews support the highly intellectualized process of wine education by expounding the fine geological, metrological, and cultural nuances that distinguish, for instance, one Burgundy *climat* from another. Rather than being set aside from sensory experience, such knowledge is, in fact, an essential part of it.

Of course (and this is especially true of the more bourgeois—critics would say the more upstart or *parvenu*—ethos of the Bordeaux proprietors), the most distinguished (in terms of their classificatory status) vineyards also seek to appeal to the wealthiest buyers, including many foreigners, who may demand external signs of distinction, for instance in the material processes of cultivation—the prominent display of beauty, cleanliness, and tradition in the organization of the landscape; in the use of distinctive and onerous processes of cultivation and maturing (e.g., the handpicking of grapes, the use of new oak barrels); and in an emphasis on science and technique, sometimes embodied in the hiring of celebrated winemakers and consultants (Nossiter 2004). In these multiple ways "the "rent" that [appellations generate is] capitalized into the value of the vineyard," such that "the rent process is circular and self-sustaining over extended periods. The areas with the highest rents per unit area are able to maintain the most demanding viticultural and winemaking practices over time. Firms and professional organizations that work in the elite appellation areas also have resources to mount advertising and public relations campaigns to maintain their image and reputation" (Moran 1993:704). Signs of distinction indeed extend outward, too, to the symbolic aspects of the wine business, through exclusive access or the cultivation of social connections to fashionable publics and powerful professionals in the wine business (critics, wine journalists). Since wine quality appreciation is largely a subjective matter, financial investments into "impression-management" devices and the enrollment of powerful allies are obviously part and parcel of the process of rent capitalization. But it is also an effect of the categorizing itself. As Martin (2000:203–204) points out, natural classifications are not only derived from social classifications, they also inspire them and serve to reproduce them. Thus, the categories used in practice have had an effect in the social realm, too: The classification of *terroirs* and vineyards reflects back on their owners and caretakers, enhancing their symbolic position and social relations and, often, bringing to life the desire or material possibility to signal one's membership in the upper class. Thus, the establishment of a status correspondence between people and products has frequently relied on practices such as the use of the term *château* (very common among the wine bourgeoisie in Bordeaux), "the construction of manor houses, the acquisition of coats-of-arms through marriage, or the design of heraldry from scratch" (Laferté 2012:9–10).

THE DEMOCRATIC CRITIQUE

These processes of social distinction have made the upper end of the French wine classification system appear elitist and antidemocratic. Certainly such critiques have been a recurrent complaint of the regions and communes forsaken by the AOC world, on the grounds that their *terroirs* deserve recognition, too (Garcia-Parpet 2009). Seen from the United States, however, it is the whole system that looks dubious. The very notion of *terroir*, with its emphasis on tradition and environmental determinism, reflects at best France's attachment to its rural patrimony (Gade 2004); at worst, it smells of snobbery and cultural elitism (Barr 1988). Variations in the classificatory implementations of the concept across regions, the never-ending extension of *terroir* designations to new viticultural areas and new products (such as cheese and olive oil), and the suspicions of scientists about the validity of *terroirist* arguments (Teil 2011) make the whole system look ad hoc—and of course it is, in the sense that *terroir* classifications are always and everywhere a product of specific, contingent historical struggles. It is therefore not surprising that American institutions have been much less inclined to give the notion formal recognition. To be sure, a counterpart to the AOC system exists in the United States. But the American Viticultural Area designation system is both more recent (1978) and less powerful: Designation areas are much larger, rules and controls more relaxed, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which oversees the designations, scrupulously avoided making quality distinctions in an effort to prevent litigation. "Instead of being exclusive, the viticultural district was inclusive; rather than denoting quality, it broadcast geography. Something for everybody" (Conaway 1990:295).

Strategies of market capture based on appellations and place names were also culturally less resonant in the New World, more difficult to ground in tradition, and less commercially efficient (vis-à-vis a public *not* educated in the complex geographical culture of *terroir*) than simple designations based on generic style or grape variety.[18] Thus, whereas French producers could rely on a hierarchy of status more or less set in nature, American producers were left with the voluntarism and science of winemakers, the taste buds of professional wine judges, the power of marketing, and the price of wines to make inferences about quality. At the top of the status hierarchy, the establishment of client–producer homologies thus took on a more calculated turn in the United States, with extravagant wineries designed by famous architects, bottle labels crafted by famous painters, and the prominent display of original art collections in the vineyard or the cellar (Nossiter 2004).

What we now recognize as the American culture of wine, obviously, did not evolve sui generis but took shape through interactions with other powers in the field—particularly the French wine industry. The peculiarities of the French situation have, importantly, fueled a powerful critique, making the fortune of a new generation of wine experts. Thus, the cultural personality of the independent wine taster, which has become so central to the functioning of the American wine market, was arguably born with the Russian émigré Alexis Lichine, an "intimate outsider" to the French world of

wine—an exporter of French wines to the United States and owner of a property in Bordeaux (Château Prieuré-Lichine). In the 1950s Lichine, looking for expansion, had bought or leased plots of lands in prized areas and invested to raise the quality of his production; yet his wine remained irrevocably classified according to his château, "only" a Fourth Growth in the 1855 Médoc *grands crus* classification. Irked at the entrenched privileges embedded in the system, Lichine first tried to work with other producers by mounting a campaign against the INAO to revise the 1855 classification; when the campaign failed, he published his own *Bordeaux Growths: Classification* in 1962 (translated in French in 1979) and kept revising it periodically until his death, thus lifting the taboo that official rankings cannot be challenged and offering a stable and widely influential alternative.

As Fernandez (2004) and Croidieu (2011) have perceptively remarked, the style and logic of professional wine tasting depends in part on the taster's position vis-à-vis the dominant actors in the world of wine. Prior to the 1960s, tasting in France was traditionally practiced by committees of growers, brokers, and wine sellers. As such, it was not designed to challenge the established classificatory order—merely to ritualistically reaffirm it. Lichine was a newcomer to this world but still a man whose interests laid prominently in Bordeaux. A producer himself, he justified his attack on the 1855 classification in terms of the logic of *terroir*, whose spirit the century-long reorganization of property in Bordeaux had spoiled, he thought.

Later critics who were even more external to the wine industry motivated their own approach to ranking and classification differently, however. Instead of naturalistic appeals to "objective" factors like soil and wine-making craft, they relied on a pure "subjective" logic that preserved and singularized (Karpik 2010) their own deeply embodied and personal forms of capital. Hence, the most influential wine taster of the last 30 years, famed U.S. wine critic Robert Parker, is also the most aloof—eschewing estate visits as much as possible and professing his absolute incorruptibility by claiming to follow only his nose (Shapin 2005; Chauvin 2011). That the nostrils and taste buds of a former lawyer from Maryland were able to shake long-established rents across the Atlantic smacks of New World revenge and builds on the populist appeal of the self-employed consumer advocate against the undue privilege of elitist clubs—in this case the Anglo-French wine aristocracy. As Langewiesche (2000) reports in his portrait of Parker for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 2000 (also cited in Shapin 2005),

> Lineage counts for a lot with the British critics and is accorded proper deference. At their worst they seem to practice criticism as an excuse for Continental excursions: the villages were picturesque, the peasants were quaint, and the wines were "noble" above all. In contrast, Parker's criticism sounds like his mother's—direct and pointed, like one American talking straight to another. . . . Last spring in Monkton, Parker said to me, "What I've brought is a democratic view. I don't give a shit that your family goes back to pre-Revolution and you've got more wealth than I could imagine. If this wine's no good, I'm gonna say so."

Parker was blunt. But he was articulating, in no uncertain terms, a different philosophy about the relationship between wine and society: No matter the status of the producer and the naturalistic logic of *terroir*, the individual talent of the winemaker makes the most difference. It was a much more voluntaristic rationale, and—like the *terroir* rationale so finely cultivated in Burgundy and so effectively exploited in Bordeaux—it, too, had a past as well as a sociology. Parker's approach, in a sense, was distinctively American: It could be better comprehended in light of the country's much shorter (and profoundly disturbed, by Prohibition) history of wine cultivation, which contrasts so starkly with French *vignerons*' reverence for tradition and their claimed humility at the altar of *terroir*; of its more open and democratic political imaginary, with its strong distaste for distinctions of class and rank; of its faith in science, technique, and machinery, which has supported a different orientation in wine science, away from geology and toward chemistry and microbiology (Lukacs 2000); and of its more intrusive agricultural habits, dominated by large industrial trusts and by an efficiency-driven approach to acting on nature (Colman 2008).

CONCLUSION

In the modern world of wine, a liberal political logic rooted in democratic rights, inventiveness, and self-promotion competes with a corporatist-conservative logic rooted in privilege, experience, and tradition; that opposition certainly captures well today the contrast between the newcomers of the New World and the established powers of the Old World (Nossiter 2004), but it also runs through each of these worlds as differently positioned producers within each field seek to stabilize the competition around them (Fligstein 2001). It is indeed important to recognize that both strategies, no matter how different their justifications, are eminently economic (Croidieu and Monin 2006): Indeed therein lies their respective appeal worldwide and the reason why the AOC system, far from being confined to the status of a French oddity, has been widely imitated (including, increasingly, in the United States). Both rely on an elusive quest for quality to create market rents for their wines: The anchoring of status distinctions through marketing or nature are just different ways to proceed. But—and this is what I have tried to show in this short text—if the various realized forms of *terroir* discourse, as well as their critiques, have taken shape through economic struggles, they cannot be *reduced to* economic struggles. Rather, historical patterns of social relations not only shape how such struggles take place, but they also help meaningful cultural imaginaries crystallize around them, through which people apprehend and relate to their surrounding natural landscape. In this way what Pierre Bourdieu *might* have called "the principles of vision and division of the natural world" get aligned with what he called (e.g., Bourdieu 1989) "the principles of vision and division of the social world." To be sure, nature's substantive contribution to the character of agricultural productions varies from place to place, sometimes in very subtle ways, and the alleged *terroir* logic—with its mix of environmental, geological, and human considerations—may be capturing some of these effects. But why the belief and significance of *terroir* is

so strong in France, why it takes the very specific form of AOCs and *crus* classifications, why the logic of classification varies so much across French regions, and why this logic still elicits so much suspicion in the United States also say a lot about each society, its history, and its relation with the rival culture across the Atlantic. Conversely, how the concepts get taken up and reworked in today's struggles[19] must be analyzed in light of changing economic and social dynamics. The political culture of the natural world is always a thing in motion, but its movement, no matter how chaotic, has a direction, shaped by evolving political myths and patterns of economic competition. Over the course of the 20th century, the increasingly dominant ideological appeal of a democratic political imaginary (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987), skillfully exploited by wine industry challengers, has weakened the most hierarchical claims that dominated early French reflections on wine classifications: The 1855 efforts in Burgundy and Bordeaux, in particular, were only concerned about the top of the distribution, which was seen as the symbolic and material anchor for all of wine society. Ironically, the same democratic ideology has bolstered the republican demands from small *vignerons* in France and encouraged the proliferation of *terroir* classifications, allowing every locality and product to ask for a place in the AOC sun—all at once a shelter from direct comparison and competition, and a means to assert individuality, authenticity, and difference in a world that demands exactly that.

NOTES

[1]I am deeply indebted to Rebecca Elliott Gilles Laferté, and Colin Jerolmack for excellent comments on an earlier version of this article. This paper was presented at the "Competition: An Interdisciplinary perspective" conference at the University of Chicago in Paris, June 2012. All remaining errors are mine, of course.

[2]As Ritvo (1997) has shown in the case of 18th-century animal classifications, zoological taxonomies were deeply permeated by the taxonomical habits of laymen (artists, hunters, farmers, butchers, breeders, showmen, and others) and with all kinds of nationalistic considerations.

[3]This is true even though blind-tasting experiments have shown repeatedly that both laymen and experts fare poorly in their abilities to identify different types of wine and distinguish expensive wines from cheap ones.

[4]1979 edition: 118, cited in Schirmer (2000:348).

[5]The term of *cru paysan*, peasant growth, was sometimes used for the latter (Dion 1952:421). One also finds *crus artisans*.

[6]As the works of Enjalbert (1953, 1978) and Markham (1998) show, there were many categorizations and classifications of wines in the Bordeaux region before *the* classification of 1855, starting around 1647. By the early decades of the 19th century, stable hierarchies existed that grouped wines into first, second, and third growths. By the 1850s, lists for the fourth and fifth growths had been clarified, and the action moved to ranking the subfifth categories of *bourgeois supérieur* and *bourgeois* wines.

[7]The main exception to this is the 1955 classification for Saint-Émilion, a more recently developed vineyard in Bordeaux. A "modern" classification that relies almost exclusively on tastings of consecutive vintages, it is by design more shifting and therefore more contested. The Saint-

Émilion appellation classification undergoes a revision every 10 years; the last (2006) reclassification, which contained a significant number of changes in the ranking of properties, generated considerable turmoil and numerous legal challenges.

[8]Prior to the laws about appellations of origin and owing to the complexity of Burgundy's territorial organization, wine brokers in Burgundy bought grapes from across the region and made and sold wine under their house names in an effort to develop brand recognition; under this system, it was also difficult to ascertain the actual origin of the final product, and there was a lot of suspicion that low-prestige wine was passed for wine coming from high-prestige villages. The laws severely constrained this practice of regional equivalence by allowing grapes to be traded only within micro regions, or appellation areas. This effectively protected the interests of the most privileged producers, although the broking business has remained important in the region (Laneyrie 1926; Laferté 2012).

[9]Author's translation. According to Lavalle (1855), there were in 1855 23,000 ha of land planted with gamay vines in Burgundy, yielding about 50–60 HL/ha, against 2,500 ha planted with Pinot, producing no more than 18HL/ha (p. 73).

[10]Lewin (2010) and Bazin (2002). The map came from Jean Lavalle's (1855) *Histoire et Statistique de la Vigne des Grands Vins de la Côte d'Or*, which was reworked and formalized by the Beaune Committee of Agriculture. Lavalle (1855) explains that wine prices were officially fixed by "*gourmets*" (p. 52)—often themselves brokers or growers—who were recruited by local mayors to taste the various wines produced in their commune's territory.

[11]For instance, Lavalle refers to conversations he had with "the mayor of Nuits."

[12]Up to 1974, the AOC system "set a limit for the amount of wine that could be bought and sold under each famous *appellation*, but there was *no limit* on the amount of wine that a vineyard could produce. This created a "cascade" system of naming, which allowed a grower in Pommard, for instance, to produce 80 hectoliters per hectare from a vineyard; of this one identical wine 35 hectoliters were called Pommard; 15 hectoliters Bourgogne, and the rest was *vin rouge*. And there were several markets (Holland, Germany, and especially the UK) that were eager to purchase the over-productions, baptizing them Pommard as soon as they had crossed the frontier." (Hansen 1995:180).

[13]Eighty-five percent of the structures of production in Burgundy are less than 10 ha (about 25 acres) (Chiffoleau and Laporte 2004:661). There are also about 100 appellations in Burgundy (as opposed to 57 in Bordeaux, even though Bordeaux is more than four times larger).

[14]Some land parcels in Burgundy have been reclassified however, for instance from a *village* appellation to a *premier cru* one.

[15]In Burgundy, *grands crus* represent 0.8 percent of the region's production and 1.5 percent of its appellations.

[16]As a result of the definition of new appellations, the number of vineyards ranked as *grands crus* has increased, too (but it has remained extremely small as a proportion of all French wine production).

[17]The world wine production peaked in the early 1980s, then decreased through the late 1990s, and has stabilized around 27,000 ML since (Anderson and Nelgen 2011). Appendix A has breakdowns by country and shows the rather dramatic decline of wine production in the Old World (especially France and Italy) and the comparative rise of the New World (especially the United States and Australia).

[18]In an unmistakable display of self-inflicted symbolic violence, American wines prior to the 1960s were identified through semigeneric labels that emphasized their resemblance with styles

of wine produced elsewhere, such as "Burgundy" (to designate a generic red wine), "Claret" (a British term used to designate a generic red Bordeaux-style wine), "Chablis," "Chianti," "Champagne," and so on.

[19]For instance, the recent redefinition of the meaning of *terroir* by French "biodynamic" winemakers (from a set "taste of place" to an obscure quality to be revealed through craft; see Teil et al. 2012) represents an interesting revision of the classificatory dynamic of economic struggles.

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APPENDIX A. WINE PRODUCTION, SELECTED COUNTRIES, 1961–2009 (IN ML). SOURCE: ANDERSON AND NELGEN (2011, TABLE 99).