

The political economy of wine: How *terroir* and intra-sector dynamics affect land use in Spain[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a constructive critique of Corrine Cash's paper "Good governance and strong political will: Are they enough for transformation?", published in volume 58 of *Land Use Policy* in 2016. By focusing on how intra-sector dynamics influence land use policies in conflicts revolving around urban sprawl, this paper aims to complement and, to some extent, widen the analytic lens deployed by Cash. The examination of the Spanish wine sector and its lack of zoning policies confirms Cash's argument about the need to go beyond discourses of 'good governance' and 'strong political will' to understand the dynamics underpinning real spatial processes. However, this exploration underscores the need to add layers of complexity to land use analyses, showing the relevance of intra-sector conflict and logics. In complicating any simplistic reduction of urban sprawl conflicts to rural–urban oppositions, the paper ultimately calls for a more dynamic and multiscalar planning theory to address complex governance issues.

1. Introduction

The paper by Corrine Cash "Good governance and strong political will: Are they enough for transformation?" struck a chord with us and our own work with wine regions in Spain and Portugal. Cash's theoretical, methodological and thematic approach to land use policy is concomitant to ours. We felt that there was potential for a constructive response after detecting one (for us) significant absence in Cash's paper, namely the broad impact of wine policies and wine sector dynamics on land use. Although wine is not, in truth, the focus of her paper, she admits that it plays a key role in the two case study areas she presents. In building on Cash's work from the perspective of wine, we intend to open a much-needed debate on the relationship between land use, heritage policies and the wine sector. Our response proceeds in opposite fashion: instead of developing our analysis starting from UNESCO biosphere or heritage reserves, we explore how the shortcomings of intra-sectoral wine legislation and denominations of origin (DOs) lead civic society to seek alternative land use protective schemes in heritage legislation.

This entails exploring the complex convergence between wine zoning, heritage and *terroir*. Our former work addressed the connection between heritage and spatial planning (Alonso González and Macías

Vázquez, 2014). However, the question of wine and *terroir* introduces another layer of complexity: wine is neither tangible nor intangible, but a relationship between human practices, soils, climates and grape varieties that express *terroir* (Barrey and Teil, 2011). What are the consequences of wine zoning in relation to *terroir* for the potential of rural and agricultural areas to resist urban sprawl? Answering this empirically oriented question leads us to a theoretical argument. We feel that Cash's adoption of a critical political economy perspective is useful as an analytical framework, but it could benefit from a planning theory counterpart emphasizing dynamism, flux and qualitative aspects. The necessarily qualitative interpretive character of *terroir* calls for planning theories that advance not only a critique of power structures but forms of planning encompassing different rhythms and processes, such as the multiscalar ideas set out by Hillier (2008).

This commentary draws on data from a larger research project on wine politics in Spain and Portugal whose results will be presented in future publications. The project employs a qualitative approach. We first carried out a literature review and a qualitative comparative analysis of wine zoning policies, which underpins our presentation of the first case focusing on Barcelona. Our aim was to obtain first-hand data from case studies deliberately chosen about zoning initiatives established by DOs to overcome low prices and economic decline. After

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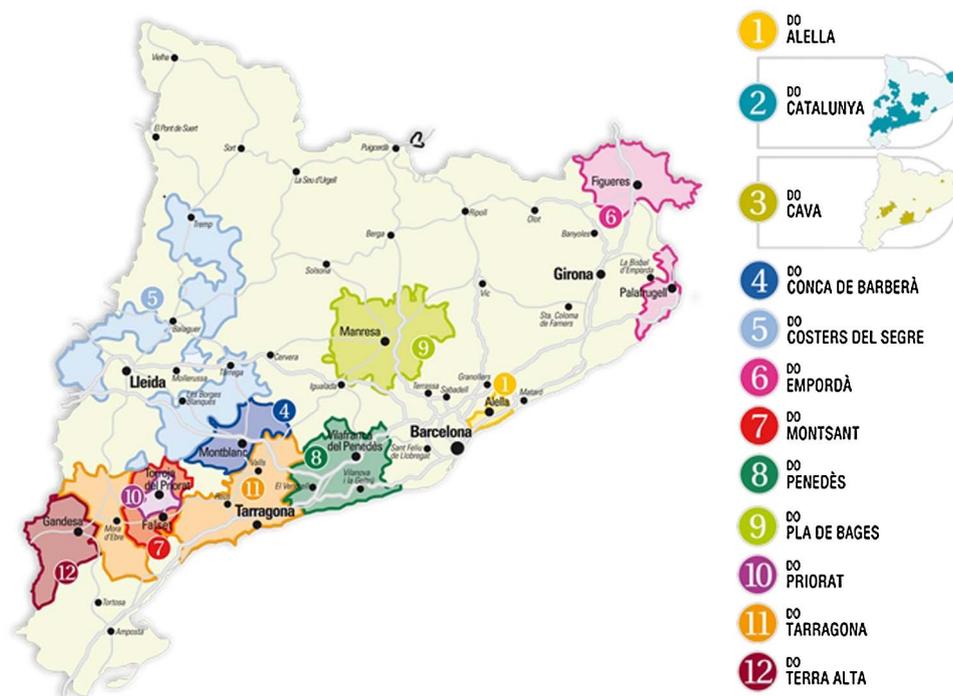


Fig. 1. Wine DOs in Cataluña. Penedés is number 8 and Priorat number 10. Source: Instituto Catalán del Vino (INCAVI).

the literature review, we surveyed twenty experts who made a list of relevant successful/unsuccessful cases of DOs using the recall-method based on their qualitative perceptions. This resulted in a list of 35 DOs, whose reliability was checked by comparing the results of the survey with the economic performance of the DOs (average grape and wine prices in Spain and in exports). Then, we used a multiple case study approach to provide a rich, representative and diverse view of four DOs (Rias Baixas and Priorat in Spain, Vinhos Verdes and Lisboa in Portugal).

The key data source came from semi-structured interviews aimed at tracing the key features of zoning and terroir, having interviewed from January 2016 until January 2017 a total of 86 informants from the wine sector, including producers, distributors, critics and other key actors. Informants were chosen following a snowball sampling strategy, and then interviewed based on semi-structured interviews to guide research, of between 60-180 minutes. Participant observation was also employed to gain trust by informants, based on collaboration in wine events, fairs and productive processes. Data analysis was based on conducting both within-case analysis and cross-case pattern search following Yin (2015). We analyzed the content of all the interviews conducted and the materials collected, grouping data into significant categories of analysis, developing patterns and comparing key elements.

2. Urban sprawl, wine and heritage: two different outcomes in Barcelona

As Cash affirms, “‘good governance’ is not enough as economic forces and powers have significant influence on outcomes. Furthermore, economic, social and political conditions that exist at specific historical time periods steer the realities that shape planning outcomes” (2016, 556). Certainly, in a neoliberal market, capital has more power to move people and money than policies, and thus from a critical political economy perspective we need to analyze what capital in the wine sector does to land use planning. Geographers like Harvey (2002) have shown how symbolic capital and monopoly rent strategies are key to increasing the value of land and real estate, and how this

triggers displacements of people and capital: from the rural to the city or vice versa.

As Cash (2016, 550) argues, land use devices for the protection of nature can increase the symbolic capital of rural areas, but this might be not enough. When rural land prices are low and urban gentrification processes are ongoing, “land is valued by its residential potential rather than agricultural worth” (2016, 547), and upper-middle classes’ flow to rural and real estate investments displaces agricultural production. This is a well-known process in the Portuguese capital, Lisbon, where the wine regions of *Colares*, *Carcavelos* and *Bucelas* have almost disappeared (Dickenson, 1990), but an unknown process in the most prestigious wine regions such as Bordeaux, Champagne or Burgundy, where the prices of wine parcels have been skyrocketing for decades (Ulin, 2002). Unsurprisingly, the price of these elite French wines is higher than their Portuguese counterparts. Most importantly, the price of *grapes* from their high-quality *terroirs* is higher. In other words, what is determinant for French wine regions to resist urban sprawl are not high land prices, but the high price of agricultural commodities.

This can be illustrated through the case of Barcelona, a paradigm of gentrification processes. Barcelona’s urban exodus has threatened the agricultural region of *Delta del Ebro* and the wine DO of *Alella* (Recasens et al., 2016). Two other wine regions are under threat of urban sprawl by both Barcelona and the nearby provincial capital of Tarragona: DO *Penedés* and DO *Priorat*. As other Spanish DOs, Penedés and Priorat are ruled by a Consejo Regulador (Regulatory Board), a trust funded by both the own wine companies comprised in the DO and public funds. Regulatory Boards are, in theory, in charge of wine zoning policies in their territories, and of ensuring coherence between wine zoning and other spatial planning legislation at other scales. However, the roles of Regulatory Boards can vary significantly. *Penedés* is a traditional wine region that epitomizes the attempt of rural social groups to contain Barcelona’s urban sprawl. It provides almost 99% of the grape to make the famous sparkling Catalan *cava*. In *Penedés*, the DO promotes a type of viticulture seeking high yields in fertile lands rather than quality grapes on slopes. Despite being a DO, the zonification of wine *terroirs* in *Penedés* is still incipient, and the sole fact of being a DO does not always ensure profitability for vine growers. Indeed, viticultural policies have

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