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Poetics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic

How well does terroir travel? Illuminating cultural translation using a comparative wine case study

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Cultural translation
Terroir
Wine
Cultural globalization

ABSTRACT

Terroir is a complex French cultural term used to identify and classify artisanal foods and drinks in relation to a specific place. Notoriously “untranslatable”, terroir has nevertheless travelled well beyond the borders of France and Europe more broadly. This paper illuminates the parts of terroir that translate culturally by using a qualitative comparative case study of two contrasting wine regions, and examines how terroir manifests in similar and different ways when it is taken up in a French and a Canadian regional cultural context. Through the analysis of terroir discourse in 30 interviews and 32 websites, this study further clarifies the factors that drive consistency and change in the translation of a cultural idea like terroir. Moving beyond the idea that “terroir is adaptable”, this paper shows how wine actors articulate terroir’s normative principles as constant, but describe terroir’s natural and human practices in locally contingent ways, nuancing our understanding of stability and change in how culture unfolds within a globalized cultural context.

1. Introduction

Terroir is a French term used to classify foods and drinks on the basis of their connection to a specific place and the characteristics (e.g., the taste, quality, etc) place transmits to these products. Terroir plays a particularly important role in defining, qualifying and classifying wine (Beckert, Rössel, & Schenk, 2014: 9; Demossier, 2010; Gade, 2004: 848), and is considered central to the field of wine (Barham, 2003: 131; Paxson, 2013: 187–188). Despite debates that dispute terroir’s existence and impact (Kramer, 2016, for example), or that declare the demise of terroir-driven French wines (Steinberger, 2009), recent research has demonstrated that terroir and terroir-based Old World winemaking remain the gold standard in the field of wine (Fourcade, 2012; Rössel, Schenk, & Eppler, 2016; Smith, 2016).

As food and wine scholars note, terroir is notoriously difficult to translate on linguistic *and* cultural levels (Aurier, Fort, & Sirieix, 2005; Barham, 2003: 128; Trubek, 2008: 9). Terroir involves a special combination of natural and cultural elements that cannot be satisfactorily summed up in a single word like “soil” or “place”, and is often articulated in English in the form of an expression, like “taste of place” (Trubek, 2008) or “sense of place”. As a fluid cultural category and philosophy in wine and food that is both fundamental to the French appellation of origin system *and* the globalized wine world (Voronov, De Clercq, & Hinings 2013), terroir can also be explored in the way it “translates” when it travels outside its implied French “home”. In this paper, I qualitatively examine the parts of terroir that translate in the winemaking field using two contrasting case studies. My goal is to shed light on the factors that drive consistency and change when cultural concepts travel and are adopted in different cultural contexts. Indeed, the borrowing

Abbreviations: AOC, *Appellation d’origine contrôlée*; CDP, Châteauneuf-du-Pape; DO, denomination of origin; INAO, *Institut national de l’origine et de la qualité*; VQA, Vintners Quality Alliance

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2017.10.002>

Received 19 January 2017; Received in revised form 21 September 2017; Accepted 1 October 2017
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and travelling of cultural concepts like terroir permeate our connected world, and are key features of local cultures in a globalized context (Appadurai, 2000; Fantasia, 1995; Garcia Canclini, 1995; Robertson, 1995). While research on the globalization of culture has shown that “cultural travelling” happens, it has not always fully examined which specific elements of concepts or ideas are more or less likely to take hold (e.g., remain stable or be adapted).

Terroir’s potential for developing and reinforcing local and rural economies has prompted scholars in disciplines like sociology, geography and anthropology to examine its capacity to adapt to contexts outside France (Amilien, Torjusen, & Vittersø, 2005; Barham, 2003; Boulianne, 2010; Bowen and Zapata, 2009; Bowen, 2010, 2015; Paxson, 2010, 2013; Trubek and Bowen, 2008; Trubek, 2008). Some of the research on terroir’s translation to places outside France has demonstrated that the term “terroir” changes in meaning and application when it travels (Bowen and Zapata, 2009; Bowen, 2010, 2015; Paxson, 2010, 2013; Trubek and Bowen, 2008; Trubek, 2008; Trubek, Guy, & Bowen, 2010). These studies have overwhelmingly focused on the adaptability of the idea of terroir – how well it can be translated to new cultural settings. However, in emphasizing the flexibility and adaptation of terroir when it travels, these studies have also tended to focus on the *differences* in terroir’s meanings when it is taken up in new places. What about the role of continuity in translating ideas like terroir to new cultural contexts, and what does this tell us more broadly about the overall stability of cultural ideas when they travel? How can we further clarify the elements that easily translate to new surroundings (e.g., those that are maintained when terroir travels), while also looking at the parts that are more difficult to translate (e.g., those that are adapted and modified)? When examining cultural translation more broadly, how are *difference*, but also *sameness* apparent (and necessary) for cultural ideas like terroir to take root in new places, and what dynamics influence consistency versus change when these ideas travel?

In this paper, I shed light on this tension between *sameness* and *difference* when terroir travels to new cultural contexts by examining what parts of terroir translate when it travels to new spaces. Using a comparative case study of two distinct wine regions – one in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, France, in the traditional “home” of winemaking and at the heart of the status hierarchy in the wine world (Smith, 2016; Voronov, De Clercq, & Hinings, 2013), the other in Niagara, Canada, an emerging wine region – I interrogate the adaptability of terroir and see how it manifests in similar and different ways when it is taken up in diverse cultural contexts. Through this analysis of the meanings of terroir in one winemaking region compared to another, I further clarify *what* parts of terroir are translated and show how wine actors articulate terroir’s definitions in surprisingly constant ways, whereas their discourses about terroir’s practices involving nature and human influence vary significantly. Thus, I move beyond the idea that “terroir is adaptable” to argue more broadly that elements of a cultural idea that are connected to place are more likely to change, whereas normative principles appear more capable of remaining stable when traveling across diverse cultural contexts.

2. Terroir: a case for studying cultural translation

Terroir is a powerful cultural category (Paxson, 2010; Spielmann & Gélinas-Chebat, 2012; Spielmann, Jolly, & Parisot, 2014; Trubek, 2004, 2008) with clear linguistic, historic, and cultural roots in France. Complex and multi-layered, terroir fuses together several characteristics (physical, organoleptic/gustatory, Symbolic, etc) into a single concept that works as *local* and *national* forms of attachment, and as a way to communicate and sell these forms of locality and nationality (along with their attributes) on *global* markets (Bohling, 2014; DeSoucey & Téhoueyres, 2009; Demossier, 2011; Fourcade, 2012). Although terroir historically referred to land or soil (Bérard & Marchenay, 1995; Tomasik, 2002) – a meaning it still retains today in its most simplified form – its definition has evolved over time to include specific references to taste and to wine (Tomasik, 2002), as well as more recent references to the human role in expressing terroir (Bérard & Marchenay, 1995; Demossier, 2011; Parker, 2015).

Terroir’s evolution from a one-dimensional concept referring to land, to a culturally validated and institutionalized classificatory notion emphasizes its fluidity and malleability over time and space (e.g., historically, culturally, politically and socially). Indeed, terroir is far from a fixed category, even within France (Daynes, 2013; Demossier, 2011; Ulin, 2013). Terroir’s flexibility and evident symbolic power as a cultural idea has prompted scholars to examine and argue for its transferability to cultural contexts outside France, such as North America (Paxson, 2013; Trubek & Bowen, 2008; Trubek et al., 2010; Trubek, 2008; Voronov et al., 2013). Today, terroir has travelled well beyond the borders of France and even, of Europe more broadly. It has been taken up by producers of diverse foods and drinks in various countries (Amilien et al., 2005; Boulianne, 2010; Bowen & Zapata, 2009; Bowen, 2010, 2015; Paxson 2010, 2013; Trubek, 2008). Overall, prior research on how terroir travels has emphasized the *differences* in translation that arise, and thus, how terroir’s definition changes as it travels. However, this research has not systematically analyzed the principles of terroir that most easily translate and remain relatively constant when terroir travels, and compared these to the aspects of terroir that are less translatable and more subject to change.

For example, Trubek (2004) examines the mediated attempt by the Californian winery Robert Mondavi to establish itself in France, and the resulting divergent definitions of terroir by American winemakers in a French context. Mondavi’s bid for winemaking land in the small town of Aniane was generally framed by the media as a combination of anti-American and anti-globalization resistance on the part of the French locals (Trubek, 2004). Trubek (2004) argues instead that this response reflects deep cultural differences in sensibilities towards the land, resulting in contrasting interpretations of terroir’s meaning. Mondavi’s narrow perception of the land in Aniane as simply “good soil” left out a crucial part of its definition as a collective “place” with cultural meanings that did not involve wine cultivation for the townspeople. This case thus highlights the mutability of terroir and its tendency to take on different attributes depending on where (and by, or for whom) it is used (e.g., in France or in the United States, by small wine growers or by large transnational wineries, etc).

The translation of terroir to other contexts, and to the U.S. specifically, has also been examined through anthropological and rural sociological lenses. These studies suggest that terroir’s interpretations do not just involve instances of misinterpretations across

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