The Political making of a Wine Market: The Case of French « PAYS D’OC » Varietal Wines

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While exports of French wine have faced great difficulties since the 2000’s, those referring to the varietals have met incredible success. The Languedoc-Roussillon region, exporting more than 2 million hectoliters across the world in 2009, has exceeded the traditional Denomination of Origin (DO) wines from Bordeaux and the Côtes du Rhône. How is this category of wine met with such legitimacy today, when it did not exist 25 years ago? The economic sociologic perspective (FLIGSTEIN 1996, 2001; PODOLNY, 2005; GARCIA PARPET, 2004, 2009; LAFERTE, 2006) enables a better understanding of how the market for varietal wines was socially structured.

With politics at work, varietals became legitimized at several levels, first local and then national. It was imposed as a key component for both the producers of the sector and consumers. In the 1980’s, local wine firms used the notion of varietals as a means to establish a new concept - or cognitive framing – of the wine market, in order to disqualify the competitors’ older modes of production. An unprecedented inter-firm co-operation took shape, giving birth to innovative strategies for production and presentation in order to adapt the local wines to the demand of international traders. Their success in exporting gradually attracted new incumbents in the game who adopted the wine-making model of the challengers, and locally diffused their standards of production and presentation. The wine-growers practices were transformed to meet their demand. Thus, the rules of exchanges, competition, and professional interests were gradually stabilized around varietals wines. To maintain this socio-economic organization, the representatives of the challenging firms began to lobby outside their regions. At a national level, the economic success of varietals gave them access to key positions with the ministerial authorities. Their locally constructed legitimacy allowed them to obtain a specific denomination, similar to that of AOC wines. In doing so, they built hand-in-hand with the State a specific set of regulations as well as a label of recognition like a brand - the “Vins de Pays d’Oc” label - guaranteeing favorable market conditions.

The existence of the local “Vins de Pays d’Oc” does not rely solely on the charisma of some local wine growers who introduced vine wines, as some might think (ATKIN, 1994), nor to the economic strategies that introduced their wines to the international markets (GARCIA-PARPET, 2004). Moreover, another major factor ought to be taken into consideration: the role of the State. In fact, the State plays a central part in the existence of a product since it defines the rules of production, marketing, competition and stability of the exchanges between the firms of the sector. It contributes to define essential market conditions for the success of a product. Our aim is to connect both the micro and macro dimensions by showing how the current success of the Languedoc-Roussillon varietals can be explained by the ability of certain local wine firms to construct with the State a set of specific regulations. Our analysis rely on press articles and interviews with founders of “Pays d’Oc” wines.

Sources:


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