



# Translating terroir: the global challenge of French AOC labeling

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## Abstract

This essay considers the current importance of labels of origin for agro-food products as part of a biopolitics of food that relinks the local and global through an emphasis on place. The particular example of the French system of AOC labeling (*appellation d'origine contrôlée*) is explored in both directions, linking to the local through the concept of *terroir*, and linking to the global as intellectual property defined by the GATT and regulated by the WTO as a “geographical indication.” Embeddedness perspectives and conventions theory are suggested as fruitful avenues for understanding why labels of origin present a challenge to conventional agriculture. These theoretical perspectives also shed light on how origin labeled products administered by the state impact rural development through the processes of negotiation they engender. The French AOC request process is outlined and aspects of it analyzed in more detail to demonstrate how it opens market forms of justification to larger arenas of social scrutiny.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the signing of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1994, a long-standing struggle between the European Union and the United States has been intensifying. Other countries from around the world have aligned themselves with either the EU or the US in this debate (WIPO, 2001). The dispute is little known to those outside of international law and trade circles, and yet the outcome could have important repercussions for rural development globally. It concerns the portion of the GATT dealing with intellectual property which addresses “geographical indications” (GIs) (Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), Annex 1C, article 22(1)). The agreement defines these as:

...indications which identify a good as originating in the territory of a [m]ember [country], or a region or locality in that territory, where a given quality, reputation or other characteristic of the good is essentially attributable to its geographical origin.

Geographical indications are known more familiarly as labels of origin, of which they are one type. They have been used extensively with wine and spirits, but can also be applied to cheeses, meat products and other foods. In Europe, “traditional” or “typical” products often carry

labels of origin. Recent agro-food literature contains many references to the growing consumer demand for these products, often as evidence of the emergence of a new rural development paradigm (Marsden et al., 2000; Murdoch et al., 2000; Van der Ploeg and Renting, 2000; Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). Most authors identify origin labeled products as important manifestations of “local,” “quality,” or “endogenous” food systems (Van der Ploeg and Long, 1994). They are seen as contributing to the “consumer turn” which may portend major shifts in the conventional agricultural model (Fine and Leopold, 1993; FitzSimmons and Goodman, 1998; Urry, 1995). Gilg (1996, p. 71), in fact, estimates that as global agricultural production differentiates into a bipolar system of high volume “day-to-day” foods produced and distributed by multinational corporations and lower volume niche or specialty products such as those produced under labels of origin, the latter category could come to account for as much as 30 percent of overall food sales due to their higher value.

Labels of origin, including geographical indications as defined in the GATT, warrant closer attention from rural development scholars concerned with local and quality food products for two reasons. First, negotiations taking place over the next few years within the World Trade Organization will largely determine the future legal interpretation and global scope of GIs. The European Union is calling for a global registry that would protect place names covered by GIs as unique for the purposes of labeling agro-food products (i.e.,

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Roquefort cheese may only be labeled such if it originates in Roquefort, France). The US opposes such a move. The compromises that must eventually be reached are likely to be relatively stable, given the high level of diplomatic energy being devoted to them. Should the strong position of GIs supported by the EU be undermined as a result of these negotiations, a potentially important rural development tool could be lost or severely constrained. Because there may be more at stake for sustainable rural development than initially meets the eye, analyses are urgently needed from scholars and rural development practitioners on both sides of the debate to inform the policy making process.

Secondly, recent agro-food literature does not always adequately take into account that there are technically several types of labels of origin which vary according to how they are implemented within different nation states and within trading blocks such as the European Union.<sup>1</sup> For example, distinctions are not always made between labels that promote a product by indicating its origin but are not protected by the state, and labels that enjoy both state protection and administrative support, as in the case of GIs. Clearly, different kinds of labels can be expected to have respectively different impacts on rural development. Without a clear understanding of how different labels of origin function, analysts run the risk of confounding situations on the ground that are empirically quite distinct. Resulting research categories and typologies may be misleading and analyses based on them incomplete or inaccurate.

This essay takes a closer look at the importance of GIs by considering how they reconnect people, production and place in the context of rural development. The first section points out some key underlying causes for the differing national positions on GIs taken at the WTO level. The influence of special interests plays a role in US opposition to a global registry of protected place names, and this aspect is addressed. But the argument is also made that a more fundamental feature of the debate derives from the status of GIs as a special kind of intellectual property. Drawing on recent theories advanced in the agro-food literature, particularly embeddedness perspectives and conventions theory, this section explores how GIs challenge conventional agricultural practice due to their explicit reference to place or territory.

<sup>1</sup>For more detail on distinguishing particular types of labels of origin from one another, see Barjolle et al. (1997), Goldberg (2001), Lucatelli (2002), OECD (2000), Pacciani et al. (2001), Sylvander et al. (2000); and WIPO (2000, 2001). A European research project, *Development of Origin Labeled Products: Humanity, Innovation and Sustainability* (DOLPHINS), is making important contributions towards a better understanding of GIs in the EU context that can help clarify these differences (see their website at <http://www.origin-food.org>).

Section two explores aspects of this challenge in more depth by examining a prominent type of geographical indication, the French *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC). Products covered by AOC labels are controlled by the state to assure both their territorial origin and their conformity to precise rules for production and processing that guarantee their “typicity,” or distinctive character. The AOC system is the oldest of the European label of origin systems and is widely regarded as the most strict and thoroughgoing of its kind. It is, in this sense, a model of reference for origin labeled products. The system is guided by the concept of “terroir,” a French word without a suitable English translation. Section two discusses the meaning of this term, then examines how it is institutionally expressed in the AOC labeling process. This process is supportive of rural development related to agricultural products in many respects, particularly in marginalized areas. But there are also possibilities for slippage in the system in terms of meeting its self-stated goals. Section two addresses both sides of this issue. The conclusion returns to a broader consideration of the potential of GIs for supporting the emergence of a new paradigm for agriculture with some necessarily brief reflections on how they may fare when applied in different parts of the world.

## 2. What is at Stake in the GI Debate?

### 2.1. Special interests

The effect of adopting a system of geographical indications at the global level is immediately troubling for many corporations in the United States, and explains much of the US opposition to GIs in WTO negotiations. Problems arise for US producers who took pre-existing European place names for their products—a frequent phenomenon as well in other countries that experienced heavy European immigration, including Canada and many countries in Latin America. Immigrant business owners of European were familiar with geographical names from their home countries that were associated with quality products and used them to promote their own products. In the US and some other countries, such place names have been treated as generic names for certain types of products, to the chagrin of countries where the actual regions are located (i.e., Champagne and Chablis in France). Thus, the establishment of a global registry of place names allowing their use only on products coming from a single geographical region would clearly have important impacts on a number of labels currently in use, and on the trade position of these products.

United States resistance to a global registry preserves the status quo in “generic” names, as well as the

investments American corporations have made in promoting brand names that derive from certain geographical names. One notable example of this is Budweiser beer, made in the United States by Anheuser-Busch, but also made in the Czech Republic by Budweiser Budvar, which lays claim to the title of the “original” Budweiser beer producer.<sup>2</sup> Note that Budweiser “US” is the number one selling beer in the world, reflecting years of adroit advertising strategy as well as significant expenditure. It would be naive to assume that Anheuser-Busch would relinquish the European name without a struggle, and the same holds true for many other corporations worldwide that find themselves in similar situations. Such conflicting interests make compromise extremely difficult, but perhaps not impossible. Much depends on the time horizon (short- or long-term) taken into account, and the vicissitudes involved in building a world trade system through the WTO (WIPO, 2000).

## 2.2. Geographical indications and the conventions of place

On a deeper level, geographical indications as a form of intellectual property challenge the law, culture and economic logic of American business, oriented as it is towards liberal economic theory based on individual ownership. The United States is familiar and comfortable with trademarks as a way of protecting the intellectual property associated with a business name. Trademarks belong to individuals or corporations (the latter being treated as individuals before the law), and can be bought and sold as a business asset. If they are infringed upon, it is up to the individual or corporation to defend their rights to the name before a court of law. The US has taken the position that the current system of international trademarks can be used to protect origin labeled products.

EU countries disagree. They point out that labels of origin “belong” to the region itself and are only administered by state governments, the latter preventing consumer fraud by overseeing certification systems and other controls. Individual producers within territories covered by geographical indications cannot buy, sell or inherit the rights to the name of the territory, as they can with trademark names. Nor can they move their production out of the region and retain the region’s name, as a corporation might move production of a trademarked item yet retain the trademark name. If producers are located in a territory that is protected by a geographical indication, they are not obliged to use the name in their product labeling. In fact, they are only allowed to do so if they follow the requirements for

certification. In the case of usurpation of the name, it is the state that intervenes—an important consideration for small-scale producers who may not be able to afford costly legal battles, particularly at the international level.

It can be argued that because geographical indications are the only form of intellectual property related to place or territory, they represent a type of collective property. In fact, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has recognized the unique position occupied by geographical indications in world trade, and has set up a special committee dedicated to developing a better understanding of how they function as intellectual property.<sup>3</sup> Concepts of neo-liberal economic theory that lie behind the economic push towards globalization posit a frictionless economy where neither space nor time impedes the free flow of goods, labor and capital. However, as a form of collective property anchored to specific places, GIs challenge this picture in significant ways. Traditional, “typical” products are enmeshed in both in both the place and history of their area of production (Barjolle et al., 1998). When they are awarded a geographical indication, the presence of the GI on the label carries specific messages to the consumer about the process of production, as opposed to information on the inherent qualities of the product alone (ingredients, etc.). Barham (2002) has identified the focus on *process* as a key distinguishing feature of product labels that attempt to connect to non-market values held by consumers, such as eco-labels (i.e., organic, fair trade, rain forest friendly, etc.). But while eco-labels may promote laudable goals, they travel with the product, so to speak, informing the consumer of *how* the product was produced, but not necessarily *where*. Labels of origin, on the other hand, hold the potential of re-linking production to the social, cultural and environmental aspects of particular places, further distinguishing them from anonymous mass produced goods, and opening the possibility of increased responsibility to place.

Theorizing in the agro-food literature has often identified connections with place and tradition as important aspects of both the production and consumption of “quality” foods. Buttel (2001, p. 174) outlines a brief history and characterization of this branch of the sociology of agriculture, which he identifies as “by far the most heterogeneous.” He traces influences of the French regulationist school, as later modified by the critiques of Goodman and Watts (1994) and the work of French scholars on conventions theory (Allaire and Boyer, 1995; Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991; Sylvander, 1994, 1995), as making major contributions to the conceptualization of “quality.” These authors, and

<sup>2</sup>See [http://www.budvar.cz/flash/index\\_en.html](http://www.budvar.cz/flash/index_en.html) for more information on this claim.

<sup>3</sup>A number of useful documents related to the work of this committee are available on the WIPO website (<http://www.wipo.int/>).

others concerned with the related theme of “local” food (Hinrichs, 2000), are indebted to the work of Karl Polanyi (1957) for the concept of “embeddedness,” which postulates that free market capitalism must be subject to social and environmental constraints if it is not to destroy the basis of the economy itself.

Conventions theory can be viewed as one way to interpret how social constraints are placed on the market to re-embed it in non-market concerns (Wilkinson, 1997). It posits the process of “justification” or legitimation as a fundamental cognitive act that serves to produce lasting agreements among social actors and ultimately maintain order.<sup>4</sup> Moments when a shared choice of action or decision is called for, or “situations” in the theory, require actors to make use of their assumptions, or world views, to “qualify” things and people. This allows them to decide which object, configuration of objects, or path of action is preferable. Because situations tend to call upon more than one world view, compromises are required among the world views involved. Compromise itself is not considered pejorative within the theory, but rather necessary. The compromise reached, in fact, represents the agreed upon path of action that allows things to move forward on a stable basis until internal or external change again requires a moment of shared justification.

Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) developed six sets of world views (or “conventions”), based on major works of Western political philosophy. Only one of these worlds—the *market* world—corresponds closely to current neo-liberal economic thinking. The other five counter or mitigate it in various ways.<sup>5</sup> These world views or “logics” have been invoked by number of authors researching origin labeled products (see, in particular, the collection of essays edited by Sylvander et al., 2000). Marescotti (2000), for example, analyzes coordination mechanisms used by actors in marketing channels linked to a “typical” agro-food product as evidence of the importance of the *domestic* and *civic* worlds. The domestic convention emphasizes the importance of the home, family and community. It stresses the role of face-to-face relationships, loyalty and trust in maintaining a functioning society. Civic logic asserts the need for adherence to shared principles for the common good, within the expectation that personal interest will be placed below the interest of the collectivity.

<sup>4</sup>The theory does not address situations in which violence is used to impose one point of view, and situations in which individuals refuse to participate in reaching social agreement (i.e., solitary or detached action).

<sup>5</sup>The six worlds are: the world of inspiration, the domestic world, the world of opinion, the civic world, the market world and the industrial world. Boltanski and Thévenot take the general position that the market form of justification is currently overstepping its bounds in significant ways, and that critical attention is therefore needed to the social process of judging or legitimating our actions.

Marescotti (2000, p. 116) concludes that because *market* logic does not account for the valuation of typical products by the consumer, “the most appropriate quality convention for typical products seems to be the result of a compromise between *domestic* and *civic* logic” (emphasis added).

Label of origin systems are particularly useful examples of both embeddedness and conventions theories at work. By insisting upon a strong link in production to the ecology and culture of specific places, they re-embed a product in the natural processes and social context of its territory. But because nature does not speak for itself, but rather through the “translation” that is the production process, conventions theory is helpful in analyzing how social systems of coordination and organization legitimate and perform a given interpretation of the product. The legitimation process, to be effective, must be carried out not only within the territory of production but nested within multiple levels of coordination from the local to the global. In addition, the consumer’s acceptance of the product must also be legitimated, which gives the word “quality” its full meaning. Aligning these various levels of coordination and making the needed connections to consumers can be seen as an operation of closing the loop on production in terms of environmental and social accounting. Capital is no longer operating in a “virtual” world without time or place (Carrier and Miller, 1998). Rather, a label of origin connects it with a specific place, and opens the possibility that producers, as well as consumers, can be held accountable for their actions *in that place*.

The dynamic nature of label of origin systems, furthermore, makes them potential candidates for acting as “platforms for resource use negotiation,” identified as crucial to the regulation of collective forms of property.<sup>6</sup> Here again, conventions theory can be a useful framework for analyzing the workings of such platforms, which take in actors at different levels, with quite different interests. Examining specific labeling cases and systems helps us situate processes of legitimation within the complex webs of relationship, both horizontal and vertical, that actually make such systems work.

The next section explores one such example, the French AOC label of origin. It begins with a discussion of the concept of terroir, which the AOC system draws upon in establishing its regulation of each product to be labeled. In the process of regulation, a number of situations arise that call for legitimation, or qualification, of both the product and the producers. Thus the

<sup>6</sup>Although geographical indications have not been studied extensively as examples of common property regimes, there are many fruitful parallels to be drawn. See, for example, the collection of articles in the special issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* (1999, 16 (3)) devoted to multiple-use commons, collective action, and platforms for resource use negotiation.

process creates potential platforms for judgement which conventions theory can be useful for analyzing, bringing embeddedness concepts and conventions theory into play in the same framework.

The purpose here is not to examine any particular AOC label in detail, but rather to draw on multiple examples to show how the overall system reproduces the cultural concept of terroir, at the same time connecting it to more macro systems of regulation through the AOCs status as a geographical indication. The AOC is particularly interesting to consider as a GI because it influenced the development of the European Union Protected Designations of Origin (PDO), to the point that once an AOC is awarded in France there is very little questioning of its legitimacy at the level of the EU.<sup>7</sup> Its influence is also being extended to other parts of the world as countries increasingly request assistance from the French government in adapting the system to their particular situation.<sup>8</sup> An understanding of the AOC process can therefore be useful for making comparisons to label of origin systems outside of France.

### 3. AOC labeling and the regulation of terroir

#### 3.1. Translating terroir

Historically, terroir refers to an area or terrain, usually rather small, whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive qualities to food products. The word is particularly closely associated with the production of wine. A terroir can be identified, for example, as one that produces a *grand cru*, or a particularly excellent wine. It can also be said that a certain wine has a *goût*, or taste, of its particular terroir. Figuratively, terroir can also designate a rural or provincial region that is considered to have a marked influence on its inhabitants. It is said in French, for example, that certain customs or idioms are rooted in their terroir, or that a person strongly conveys a sense of the terroir of their

<sup>7</sup>This is based on an interview conducted in Brussels in 2001 with individuals from the EU Commission charged with review of PDO applications. An anonymous reviewer pointed out that creation of the EU protected labels of origin generated several bitter disputes over whether certain names should be considered generic (i.e., Brie, Cheddar and Feta cheese), which is certainly the case. But the focus here is on demonstrating that a very culturally defined and locally grounded concept such as terroir is connected to more macro levels of decision making via a label of origin system, creating *potential* openings for local voice at these higher levels. Specific information on the EU Commission Quality Policy in Agriculture, including a listing of registered products, label symbols, etc., can be found at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/qual/en/index.en.htm>.

<sup>8</sup>An interview with M. Jacques Fanet of the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (conducted in Paris, 2001) indicated an increasing number of such requests. The 2000 INAO annual report remarks that additional funds and staffing are needed to adequately address them.

birth and upbringing.<sup>9</sup> This concept of terroir relates to a time of much less spatial mobility, when change occurred at a slower pace. Terroir products, in this interpretation, resulted from long occupation of the same area and represented the interplay of human ingenuity and curiosity with the natural givens of place.

The concept of terroir reaches its most elaborate expression in the case of wine, and so it is no accident that one encounters it most frequently in texts on this subject. James E. Wilson, author of *Terroir: The Role of Geology, Climate and Culture in the Making of French Wines* (Wilson, 1998, p. 55), describes it in the following way:

Terroir has become a buzz word in English language wine literature. This lighthearted use disregards reverence for the land which is a critical, invisible element of the term. The true concept is not easily grasped but includes physical elements of the vineyard habitat—the vine, subsoil, siting, drainage, and microclimate. Beyond the measurable ecosystem, there is an additional dimension—the spiritual aspect that recognizes the joys, the heartbreaks, the pride, the sweat, and the frustrations of its history.

Wilson goes on to explain that there is an assumption among winegrowers that each terrain “should be allowed to be itself and produce the wine for which nature endowed it” (p. 55). In other words, winemakers are striving to produce a wine that is special in the sense that it bears the “signature” of their style of vinification while not interfering with the “natural” taste that wines produced from that terrain should display. The historical terroir concept viewed wine production is a complex dance with nature with the goal of interpreting or translating the local ecology, displaying its qualities to best advantage. A great deal of knowledge about the local terrain is needed for success, as well as respect for local natural conditions that can be expressed through the wine.

The notion of terroir has met with renewed interest in recent years, however, and is refocusing discussions of how the old is made new in the ongoing process of history. Its interpretation today reflects the involvement of powerful social actors, such as farmers unions (syndicates), whose influence helped shape its meaning as labels of origin for wine began to emerge in France in the early 19th century (Ulin, 1996; Demoissier, 1999).<sup>10</sup> It is also part of the recent surge of interest in all things to do with history, heritage or “patrimoine” (Blowen et al., 2000; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000; Bérard and Marchenay, 1995, 2001; Rautenberg et al., 2000). Well-

<sup>9</sup>The definition and examples given here are drawn from the *Petit Robert*, a well-known standard French dictionary.

<sup>10</sup>I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out the importance of this influence.

known French historian Jacques Revel refers to this as a sort of national obsession with what he terms *patrimonialisation*, which began more or less around the year 1980, declared to be the Year of Patrimoine by president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. *Patrimonialisation* refers to the effort to trace, record, and commemorate with museums and monuments all sorts of events both majestic and mundane related to French history. Natural places, landscapes and traditional foods have been swept up in this frenzy, as well. Revel (2000, p. 2) states that:

It is as though, little by little, the French acquired the habit of considering the ensemble of the infinitely diverse traces of their collective experience as a treasure that urgently needed to be conserved and protected, a base that grounded them.

Part of this fascination with the past can be attributed to the enormous amount of rapid change that France has witnessed over the latter half of the 20th century, particularly since the 1960s. In this sense, seeking out traditional products can be seen as one reflection of the “malaise” of the French with modernization and globalization (Barham, 1997), as well as their concern over recent health and safety threats that have arisen in the food sector. The taste for history in the form of “produits de terroir,” therefore, reflects in part the ongoing construction of a collective representation of the past through food that is perhaps largely unconscious for consumers.

At the same time, terroir also reflects a conscious and active social construction of the present by various groups concerned with rural areas in France (social and economic organizations, state agency personnel, academics), who jostle for position in their efforts to recover and revalorize elements of the rural past to be used in asserting a new vision of the rural future. As such, the concept of terroir is being hotly debated in France and has become a highly politicized notion for some. Anthropologist Muriel Faure recounts the process of *patrimonialisation* of rural cuisine in the case of Beaufort cheese, a product from the Northern Alps (Faure, 1999). She traces the “refinement” of this agricultural product into a cultural object, assisted along the way by a host of local actors not directly implicated in production of the cheese, but very concerned with the tourist and development value of claiming such an “authentic” element of national heritage in their region. One result of this tendency in rural areas across France, and indeed in many parts of Europe, is a concern that the countryside and the customs defined as consonant with it will undergo a process of “Disneyfication,” becoming living museums for visitors from the city, a kind of “rurality under glass” for the consumption of privileged consumers.

A different misgiving is expressed by academics and intellectuals in France, who watch with some disquiet the public's apparent need to recover a sense of the “authentic” and the “true”—without realizing the contested nature of these terms—by returning to the foods associated with their rural roots (Ray, 1998). Bérard and Marchenay (1998) note similarities in wording and tone between recent advertisements praising terroir products and the rhetoric and reactionary ideology of the Pétain era in France.<sup>11</sup> However, over and against an inward looking, xenophobic interpretation of terroir, they argue for acceptance of history as a point of reference, a kind of rootedness that participates in and supports universalistic values such as liberty and tolerance. In this view:

[Products of the terroir] are synonyms for cultural diversity, reflections of the evolution of a society, of its attachment to certain habits of consumption, and not the guardians of a culture that is fixed and turned in on itself. Locality participates in the construction of identity, it doesn't suffocate it (Bérard and Marchenay, 1998, p. 3).

Thus terroir is undergoing a process of cultural re-evaluation whose outcome is still uncertain, but which potentially points towards a future that includes a valued past without becoming either rigid or exclusionary.<sup>12</sup>

Because of the strong interaction between natural and social factors that is reflected in the concept of terroir, it could be considered representative in some respects of the “shared corporeality” of agro-food practice described by FitzSimmons and Goodman (1998, p. 195). They insist that “ecology and social relations, the production and reproduction of nature and society, be located within a unified analytical frame.” The current debate over the meaning of terroir provides one such frame, as well as reconnecting us to the embeddedness approaches to agro-food studies discussed earlier. However, because it is a fluid, cultural construction, it can be difficult to apply the insights of conventions theory to its evolution. We now turn to a consideration of the AOC label of origin process as an application of the concept of terroir. The discussion emphasizes how the system is organized to make the transition from produit de terroir as a concept to the “qualified” agro-food entity that becomes an AOC label product. This system of regulation presents a number of “situations,” or moments of judgement, that call upon the non-market worlds of conventions theory to find a legitimating compromise.

<sup>11</sup> An anonymous reviewer notes that French rural *heritage* has been recuperated at earlier periods in its history, as well (see Peer, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> For a more extended discussion of the social construction of terroir as a tool for rural development, see Demoissier (2001).

### 3.2. The French AOC administrative process

The AOC regulatory system has been evolving in recent years along with EU recognition of labels of origin. It has had to expand to encompass more products than wine and spirits (cheeses, meats, etc.), and in step with the overall cultural reconsideration of *patrimoine*, it has begun to emphasize more strongly the cultural and collective aspect of the tie of the product to its terroir. Critics point out that it is heavily bureaucratic, and as a result is rather costly.<sup>13</sup> Initial requirements for obtaining an AOC label are complex, as are ongoing requirements for retaining it. There are opportunities for slippage and contradictions in the system, several of which are pointed out below. Nonetheless, it has been remarkably successful in developing the French wine industry and, more recently, in supporting the development of a myriad of other products. Presence of an AOC label on a product reflects the completion of a multi-level process of negotiation from the local to the state level. When this negotiation is successful, it results in a product that is strongly embedded in the natural, social, cultural and political dimensions of its territory. In this instance, AOCs provide support for a view of geographical indications as potential sites for the emergence of a new system of agriculture that would reaffirm and support unique values associated with local places.

From the producer’s point of view, gaining approval for a new AOC is long and arduous (see Fig. 1). Producers must organize themselves into a union that will later uphold the rules of production at the local level. Individual producers or private enterprises cannot request an appellation in France; it must be a collective process, and these take time.<sup>14</sup> The producers’ union prepares a detailed dossier that is submitted to the Institut National des Appellations d’Origine (INAO). The dossier typically takes a year or more to prepare, but it can take much longer in complicated cases. In the dossier, producers must:

- explain precisely the reasons motivating their request for an AOC,
- provide evidence that the name (appellation) they are requesting has an historical reputation with consumers and is known to them; this usually requires

<sup>13</sup> In the case of AOC production, as opposed to some other labeling schemes such as Label Rouge poultry, this cost is heavily subsidized by the French government, reflecting the importance they place on this type of production, which is linked to France’s reputation in the area of food quality.

<sup>14</sup> This has not always been the case in France, and is not the case in all European countries for labels of origin (in Britain, for example, individuals can apply for and receive label of origin protection). However, this collective aspect has been increasingly emphasized in recent years and applications have been turned back that did not meet this criterion (M. Claude Béranger, INAO, pers. comm., 2002).

### RECOGNITION OF AN AOC (or modification of a condition of production)

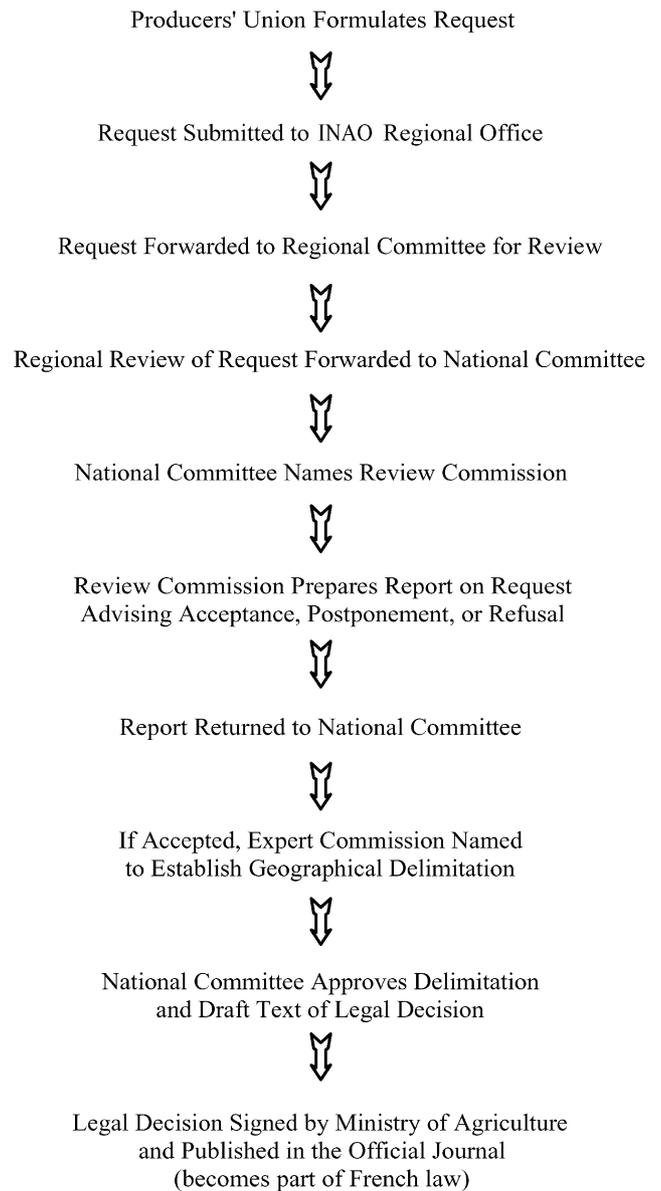


Fig. 1. Based on a diagram presented in the INAO Annual Report for 2000.

assembling written evidence of use of the name, as well as interviews,

- establish the product’s close tie to the terroir of origin based on natural factors, and on human factors or “savoir faire,” which together should produce the product’s “typicity,” or special, traditional character,
- furnish evidence that will allow an evaluation of how well the product distinguishes itself from other similar products which exist on the market,
- describe the area of production and the exact procedures involved in cultivation (wine) or produc-

tion (cheese, meat products) of inputs and in processing,<sup>15</sup>

- carry out an economic study of the product, including existing and potential markets, prices, distribution channels, value-added of this product relative to other products which are similar, and so forth.

The dossier is forwarded by INAO it to a Regional Committee composed of representatives from the production, processing and distribution sectors affected by the request, assisted by INAO professionals.<sup>16</sup> After the dossier has been thoroughly reviewed, the Regional Committee decides whether it should be forwarded, at which point it is sent to the appropriate National Committee for review.

National Committees are made up of professionals selected from among appropriate Regional Committee members,<sup>17</sup> accompanied by national level experts in export and distribution and consumer representatives. They are also assisted by INAO representatives. The National Committee appoints a special Review Commission for each request, including National Committee members along with producers and other professionals chosen from outside the requesting region. Their work can take another year or more to complete, and can include hearings. They report their recommendation to the National Committee (accept, postpone, or refuse) and establish final production rules.

If the request is accepted, a commission of experts is formed to fix the definitive boundaries for the AOC. The project is then sent to the Minister of Agriculture with draft legal text to establish and protect the appellation. The Minister of Agriculture signs the text into law (no changes are allowed at this point) and forwards it through proper channels for publication in the Official Journal, at which point it becomes part of the French legal system. The new appellation is now protected as collective property of the producers, as well as part of the agricultural, gastronomic and cultural heritage of France.

After an AOC is awarded, it is monitored by agents from one of 26 INAO offices which are distributed throughout France. They are trained with specialized knowledge of the products they control and the local area of production. They respond to producer requests for assistance, but they also carry out unannounced farm visits to assure that producers are following the

production techniques required for their label.<sup>18</sup> Because of the wide scope of expertise required in considering a new AOC request, INAO commonly retains technical consultants in any number of fields, such as geologists, soil scientists, plant scientists, anthropologists, sociologists and historians, to carry out its work. As a private-public entity, it holds final jurisdiction over all appellations, and establishes and enforces regulations concerning almost every aspect of growing, making, and marketing AOC products down to a very fine level of detail.

The complexity of this process reflects the seriousness with which it is addressed by various levels of producers and professional experts. Each stage in the process presents a possible opportunity for discussion, debate and reflection, and ensuing negotiations confront participants with the necessity of justifying their positions. The history of care taken with the process has been rewarded by consumers in the form of increased product sales and higher commanding prices. INAO administrators attending a recent conference in Die, France,<sup>19</sup> praised the success of AOC production as a value added strategy within French agricultural policy, as well as its contribution to encouraging the preservation of rural *heritage* and the maintenance of traditional landscapes. They reported that export sales for AOC products continue to rise and are highly profitable. In 1999, new export revenues for wine from France exceeded those of grains; quite an accomplishment considering that France is the second largest grain exporter in the world (Valadier, 2000). France is also considered the top world producer of quality wine and retains the highest world rank in terms of value of production.

Because AOCs have helped maintain agricultural profitability in zones that are considered difficult or marginal, they can be considered an important tool for rural development. They have helped many traditional, historic products remain in production and competitive on the market that might otherwise have disappeared. They have helped create rural employment, both directly and indirectly, in associated industries such as tourism (Bessière, 1998). Because France is the most visited

<sup>15</sup>For products such as cheeses and meats, for example, this includes attention to how the animals are raised, what they are fed, whether they are to be grazed only, etc.—in other words, detail on every step of the process that precedes the actual processing.

<sup>16</sup>Regional Committees exist for wine and spirits and are under development for other sectors, such as cheese and meat products.

<sup>17</sup>These professionals are appointed for 6-year terms and make up at least half of the members of each National Committee.

<sup>18</sup>There are some similarities here between the INAO regional offices and the system of Cooperative Extension within the US Land Grant system in terms of expertise being provided to producers in a distributed fashion, with agents typically trained in specific areas (dairy, etc.). The closest US government parallel to INAO procedures at this time would be the implementation of organic standards at the federal level, a labeling scheme which also requires certification procedures and on-farm visits.

<sup>19</sup>“Protéger les produits, protéger les paysages, le rôle des labels et des appellations d’origine dans la construction du patrimoine culturel” (*Protecting products, protecting landscapes, the role of labels and appellations of origin in the construction of cultural heritage*), May 14–17, 2001, Die, France. Organized by the École Nationale du Patrimoine (*National School of French Heritage*).

country in the world, this last contribution is non-negligible in terms of the national economy, and has helped stabilize population in some rural areas previously considered in decline.

The decision to award an AOC designation to a product, and by association to its region of origin, is based on the strength of the link between the two. Evaluation of this link depends directly on the concept of terroir. In an important study of how INAO agents use various terms when examining a request for an AOC, the concept of terroir was selected as the most important notion out of 27 different concepts used by the 112 agents included in the study (Scheffer and Roncin, 1999; Scheffer and Sylvander, 1998). Experts are called upon to make this judgement in three main categories: natural factors (tie to the local environment or ecological niche), human factors (savoir faire, or particular techniques and know-how confined to that area), and history (public knowledge of product as originating in that area, recognition of the association between product and place that is consistent and widespread). Each factor is investigated individually as well as in terms of how they combine to determine the “typicity” of the product. To obtain an AOC, as product must incorporate all three aspects of its terroir and carry them forward to the consumer, but the natural and human factors are decisive.

### 3.3. Natural factors

For those most knowledgeable about the AOC system, natural factors are the most important determinants of how well a product represents its terroir. In the study of INAO agents just mentioned, approximately half of those interviewed felt that terroir referred primarily to natural qualities of a geographic area (soil, microclimate, slope, exposure, etc.), and the other half felt that terroir meant a blend of these natural factors with human factors. Thus, of the three factors to be considered, the tie to nature figures most prominently in determining a product’s tie to its terroir.

Perhaps because of this, it is often thought that the relationship works in the other direction, as well. That is, many people assume that AOC products have a beneficial effect on the environment, or that they are produced in a more sustainable fashion. Is this necessarily the case? According to Bérard and Marchenay,<sup>20</sup> the state does subject AOC areas to a higher level of scrutiny in terms of compliance with environmental regulation. As a result of the standard setting negotiations that go on during the requesting phase of an AOC, environmental restrictions on AOC producers may be higher than for other types of production, but this is not a given. It is sometimes claimed that AOCs

contribute to the preservation of biodiversity, but the situation can be complicated (Marchenay and Bérard, 1995). For example, in the case of an AOC requested for the châtaignes d’Ardèche (chestnuts of the Ardèche region), only 19 of the more than 60 varieties developed by peasant farmers over several centuries were retained as eligible for the AOC, leading the person in charge of assisting the producers in the formulation of their request to question whether an AOC can actually be detrimental to biodiversity (Sabot, 2000). On the other hand, without the protection of the AOC, it is highly likely that most of the 19 varieties actually retained would have been lost from production over time.

In some cases, the preservation of traditional methods of production does result in a clear environmental gain. Saint Joseph wine is one example. Over the centuries, Saint Joseph came primarily from steep hillsides that did not lend themselves to cultivation by mechanized methods. Vines, particularly near the tops of hills, occupied terraces built of stone at a time when tree removal was done by hand. However, over the last century the boundaries set by the AOC encompassed more than just the steep hills. These boundaries were recently redrawn by INAO to realign the production area more closely with its historical boundaries (INAO, 2001). As a result, the terraces, which had been allowed to deteriorate, were rebuilt and the skills needed to maintain them relearned. The change fulfilled more than an historical and aesthetic mandate, however. Without the terraces, erosion was gaining on the hillsides which could eventually result in mudslides, removing all topsoil and vegetation and leaving nothing but bare rock. The story of this AOC is not unusual in its blending of human history and environmental protection, to the point where it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the two.

Finally, the delineation of an AOC area presents a challenging task of ecological analysis that is a crucial aspect of the overall system. This analysis confronts all of the challenges that are well known to ecologists who attempt to define ecological regions elsewhere (Bailey, 1996), except that in the case of a terroir the regions are usually at a smaller scale than those used by ecologists.<sup>21</sup> INAO is in the process of reviewing delineations for several AOCs to make certain they are environmentally and historically coherent. This is in part a response to trade negotiations within the WTO which have brought pressure to bear across the EU for more harmonized standards. The application of science required to arrive at these new delineations can, on the one hand, be seen

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> According to Robert Bailey, a widely respected expert on ecoregional geography, the only US state that has delineated ecoregions down to the scales comparable to AOC delineation is Missouri (see the Missouri Resource Assessment Partnership at <http://www.ecrc.usgs.gov/morap/>) (personal communication).

as a process of rationalization that will eventually undermine the more cultural and historical interpretations of terroir. On the other hand, some view this process as a re-legitimation of science itself, as it is being called to the service of more than market objectives. The key to this difference is the emphasis of the terroir concept on interpreting what is there in nature to be known, rather than viewing nature as an obstacle to be overcome or controlled for production.

### 3.4. Human factors, or “savoir faire”

Terroir delineation must also take into account factors that typically do not concern ecologists, such as the current and historical geographic distribution of the human know-how or savoir faire associated with the product. While there may be a clear cradle of historical production, the extent of currently existing knowledge about the product still has to be determined. Laurence Bérard, an anthropologist who has often been called in as an expert to work on this aspect of evaluation for AOC requests, states that knowing how to take these human factors into account is *the* problem for awarding a new AOC.<sup>22</sup> She begins by working closely with producers to define key technical aspects of production. Researchers document these techniques in detail, as well as the producers’ ideas of the spatial distribution of their skill. Taking the producers’ delimitation as a starting point, researchers then look *within* the area for problems, defined as situations in which techniques diverge too widely from the established norm. They then gradually push outwards toward the edges, looking for the point at which the typicity of the product is no longer present.

Defining the exact boundaries and definition of an AOC can be controversial among producers. Some who participated in the AOC request might find themselves outside of the final boundaries. “Free riders” may appear demanding to be included. Neighbors who follow slightly different processing methods may find that one of them is included while the other is not. Producers who want to use the AOC may balk at the production requirements. In the case of wine, for example, production ceilings are often imposed as means of supply side control.<sup>23</sup>

Finding a link between a product and a terroir also means that the effect should, in principle, be scientifically demonstrable. There are a number of research

teams in Europe investigating how a terroir marks the taste of its products in terms of chemical composition and other factors. However, for many products, this determination is made on the basis of tasting panels. Because the products under consideration are also historical artifacts that generally predate industrialization of production methods, organizing tasting panels raises the question of choosing competent judges.<sup>24</sup> They are usually selected from the area of production, and include producers, connoisseurs (retired producers or consumers with many years of experience with the product), “mediators” such as chefs and specialized vendors and distributors, and government agency personnel assigned to follow and document the request process. Producers’ voices remain important in this phase, but they must weigh in among the voices of other experts who may not be from their region, or may be representing the interests of consumers (for example, specialty retailers). The compromises reached further embed acceptance of the final result in broader networks, horizontally at the local level but also vertically through production and distribution chains through the different levels of expertise involved in regulation and control.

The result of all of the research and negotiation involved in establishing an AOC is the *cahier de charges*, or certification requirements. These remain open to change, however, as producers can and do return to them from time to time to make adjustments (Bérard and Marchenay, 2000). This raises the issue of which actors in a territory can take part in the organization and potential future evolution of the production methods. In the past, only producers organized AOC production in interaction with the state. Increasingly, other actors are getting involved who are pursuing broader rural development objectives linked to the cachet and consumer draw of specialty products in their area. These actors can include regional tourism bureaus, agents from park areas in or near the AOC area, regional economic development specialists, representatives of local businesses such as hotels and restaurants, and producers of other regional agro-food products or handicrafts. AOCs are now clearly recognized as important contributors to the economic and agricultural structure of a region, as well as to its shared identity. And so while producers must still cooperate among themselves to prepare the actual request for INAO, they now find they are involved with larger networks of players in the process. It is in analyzing these discursive contexts that scholars are finding fertile ground for the application of conventions theory. The AOC process,

<sup>22</sup>Bérard et al. (2001) is an excellent guide to delineation of a terroir area in the context of the EU-level system for Protected Geographical Indications (PDI); the process is similar for AOC delineation. This discussion is based on an interview with her in 2001.

<sup>23</sup>I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for a reminder of this fact. However, it should also be noted that many producers eligible for an AOC devote only a percentage of their production to the AOC, selling the remainder under a different label.

<sup>24</sup>Casabianca and de Sainte Marie (2000) address how sensory evaluation enters into establishing parameters of acceptability for a product whose “authenticity” is linked to collective experience and tasters’ memories.

and label of origin systems more broadly, provide a trace on shifts taking place in the rural agro-food arena, and can contribute to reflection on societal changes that reach well beyond the rural.

#### 4. Conclusion

This essay has made the argument that the current expansion of label of origin systems globally represents an opportunity to examine new forms of local-global connections in the making. Embeddedness perspectives combined with the conventions theory framework can inform analyses of these systems as they evolve. Together, they help open up the discussion of whether we are moving towards further industrialization of the agro-food system, or perhaps instead witnessing a moment of legitimation crisis within that system that will lead to further development of alternatives. Emphasizing the nature of negotiation and compromise, conventions theory does not rule out market logic, but rather requires that it co-exist with other ways of viewing the world that constrain it within social, historical and ecological limits. It allows us to treat the multi-level negotiations of origin labeled production as instances of what David Goodman has termed “an international bio-politics of agriculture and food,” one that raises the critical questions of, “Where, how, and by whom is food to be produced, processed, marketed, and consumed?” (2000, p. 217). Like the discursive field of organic production, the discourse around labels of origin brings in issues of “the incorporation of nature (both symbolic and biophysical), social movements, consumers and food scares, regulatory politics, contest over corporate involvement, and issues of standards and meanings” (Campbell and Liepins, 2001, p. 23). But labels of origin tie all of these questions to specific places, arguably intensifying and clarifying discussions of who will ultimately benefit, and on what basis of legitimation.

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