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The "terroir products", between environment, culture and territorial development

Serge Ormaux
Professor at the University of Franche-Comté
Director of the TheMA laboratory (UFC- CNRS)

Abstract :

In the double context of globalization and socio-ecological transition, numerous territories are in search of models of development granting a larger place in social dimension, in environment, in culture, and generally in immaterial resources. They also explore other kinds of governance based on collaboration, participation and global approach. In this regard, the mode of development constructed on the promotion of "terroir products" appears as a particularly promising way; on condition of course that the reference to the" terroir" is not a simple argument of marketing in the service of a product but the support of a true project of territory.

The definition given in France by INAO and INRA and validated during the international meeting of UNESCO in 2005 meets some of the principles emphasized by the paradigm of territorial intelligence:

"The terroir is a delimited geographical area defined by a human community which constructs in the course of its history a lot of distinctive cultural characteristics, collective knowledge and practices that are founded on a system of correlation between natural environment and human factors. This know-how reveals originality, confers typicalness, and allows recognition for products or services native to this space and therefore for men who live there. Terroirs are innovative areas which cannot be only assimilated with tradition".

To illustrate this definition, we shall lean on the Jura Mountains in France, that are particularly rich in "products of terroir", worked out under official quality sign. We shall show how a strategy of promotion of "terroirs" in link with historical heritage and landscape can keep the population in rural areas, give perspectives to the young people and attract tourists and visitors, while reinforcing identity of territory.

Operations of labellisation or geographical demarcation can be considered as revealing of the functioning of the territorial system. Solidarities and oppositions come to light better than through an audit. It confers to the analysis of these scenarios a great scientific interest.

In the opposite, all these steps can lay the foundations for a shared territorial diagnosis, can gather energies, and can be the opportunity of a detailed reflection on the objectives of a socio-spatial entity.

Keywords: terroir, collective knowledge, typicalness, identity, Jura

Among the new models considered for the development of the fragile rural areas, the elaboration of terroir products[1] often appears as a pertinent solution, even more, as a miraculous promise. But the success of the formula implies in itself its own limits, particularly due to the ambiguity of the notion.

By reference to the middle mountains of the Eastern France, particularly rich in traditional cheese and salt meat, we will try to show that if the terroir approach does not get caught in the trap of the pretence, it can actually provide interesting territorial perspectives and for that matter certain areas did not wait the present mode to benefit from them. But the bet of the terroir gets the concerned territory in all its elements.

The process of labelling and geographic delimitation can therefore be considered as really revealing for the functioning of local systems. The solidarities and the divides, the fact of taking roots and the over taxation, the wills and the opportunism emerge more certainly than through an audit, which offers to the analysis of these scenarios a first rank scientific interest.

Conversely, all these approaches can be real catalysers. Conducted in a good way, they can set the basis of a territorial diagnosis, gather energies, and represent the opportunity for an in-depth reflexion upon the objectives of a production, of a field or of a socio-spatial entity.

Finally, the field of terroir products particularly deals with the reflexion conducted nowadays in the field of territorial intelligence. It is situated at the interface of the projects of territorial development, of the cultural heritages and of the environmental and landscape context. Besides, it often concerns issues of local governance, of the actors' game and of cooperation.

The terroir effect at the service of territory

The food processing commodities with typical character change the relation between product and territory. Beyond the quality of production and the organoleptic performance, their consumption involves an identity search, with reference to a code which is still little stabilized. From an economic point of view, these kinds of products represent one of the most efficient means of internalizing elements traditionally considered as externalities within the framework of the classic economic pattern. There is certainly an opportunity to grab in order to connect the farm production, the landscape and the memory and in order to feed the thought with the new farmer's functions in fragile areas.

The issue of the landscape maintenance and of the keeping of the social network in the rural spaces finds in the land approach an anchorage efficient also because it is interactive. By means of the added value it allows creating and spreading, the land product can authorize the sustainability of the population and the activities as well as the landscape maintenance. Conversely, the landscape offers to the product some of its essential qualities, by means of metaphoric mechanisms. Through toponyms, landscape stereotypes and place symbolism, the consumer comes into contact with a space, meaning a space in general, first level of satisfaction and distinction and a space in particular, perceived through a set of representations.

One of the most important forms of this evolution is embodied in the performance of the production itself. The cheese cooperatives from Jura Mountain are at present going through a triple mutation: spatial concentration of the workshops and fusion of the little structures so as to better face the market, construction or land settlement for new locals so as to meet the European sanitary standards and rational organization of the guests' welcome.

[1] Or « land products », in french : « produits de terroir »

The cheese dairies invested in setting superior galleries for guests only and equipped with overhanging glazing meant to enable the observation. Guided tours, observation panels, interactive markers and brochures found in the tourism offices and accommodation places often come to complete the system.

This integration in the touristic area is also expressed by a reinforcement of the short channels of distribution, direct sale at the cheese dairy, available by mail order, sales animation for the holiday organisers located in the nearby area. Some of the cheese dairies in the region make in this way more than 30% of their turnover.

The direct sale generally goes beyond the product elaborated by the workshop to other regional products, salt meat, honey, wine etc. But this distribution means influences the production itself, cheese dairies oriented exclusively towards one type of cheese (for example, the "Comté") start to produce other types as well, little quantities and reserves to the direct sale (Morbier, Raclette) to provide a range large enough for the consumers-guests. These ones expect ranges of products rather than isolated presentation, especially when they come from far-away places. The offer of regional products is then integrated to the global offer of cares and services that everybody feels entitled to expect in their practice of green tourism.

The target public is not limited to tourists; the regional urban clients represent an important part of the clients. The terroir has therefore this particularity of being able to be declined in several registers, to evoke to the roots as well as the exoticism. A feasibility study conducted by the Agriculture Department of Franche-Comté showed that the setting of a quality porcine meat could only have been explained by the interest of the regional clients. The communication strategies must take into account this multi- spatiality.

The offer of image can sometimes go even further; the revival of the vineyard of the Loue Valley (Jura, France), abandoned for almost a century undertake a real participative approach. The consumer is invited to an activity of territorial patronage by means of acquiring parts in the associative vineyard, which will allow them receiving every year some bottles of wine and especially inestimable symbolic dividends.

However, the terroir effect makes references to a global conception of the local development and only a synergy between different activities, services, equipments, as well as the creation of regulation authorities can lead to a conclusive result. But counting so much on the representations involves also several problems.

The limits and the ambiguities

If the land product can save the territory, it tends to attach to it some images that make it very sensitive to any disturbance in their emission or their reception. This form of aggression can question the capital of confidence accumulated along the years, as shown in the field of cheese by the disastrous campaign carried out in 1987 by the media about the Listeria bacteria. Although it affected exclusively the Swiss Vacherin, the consequences of the intoxication were catastrophic for the French Mont-d'Or which had to totally give up going out on the market that year and to invest in an expensive communication campaign, before setting a protocol of bacteriological self-control.

To the extreme, the image of the product can be harmful to the modernization of the territory by rendering it a kind of huge ecological museum and conversely the development of certain activities can compromise an already existing terroir effect. In the Beaune region (Bourgogne, France), the development of an important logistic function of European scale affects landscapes set in the register of patrimony and of wine-producing excellence. Likewise, in the South of the Rhone Valley, the nuclear site of Tricastin shades the neighboring vineyard with basically the same name, the "Coteaux de Tricastin" (Tricastin Vineyards). We deal here with conflicts of representations which may increase together with the generalization of the land productions.

In the same way, the difficulty of linking the ancient know-how and the present European sanitary constraints led some of the AOC (labels of controlled origin) cheese producers to request special dispensations so as they could use a certain technique or certain materials, for instance the wooden tools for the Bleu de Gex. Not that the usage of these kind of tools is an absolute "must" at the technical or taste level, but the Bleu de Gex always showed a wood culture which is entirely part of its identity. The punctilious attachment of the inter-professional unions to these traditions, particularly within the framework of these AOC cheese producers from Eastern

France, proves that the typical character does not come only out of the senses. Consuming the product means also communicating with a tradition, know-how and a landscape.

If the notion of maintenance of landscapes by preserving the traditional activity which gave them birth is theoretically fair enough, it is also true that many elements of the present landscape are actually fossil objects. The low stone walls of the Jura valleys found their justification in the framework of the ancient agriculture which was supposed to separate the cultivated lands situated at the bottom of the valley from the pastures situated on the mountainsides. Since the ploughing almost disappeared and the pastures were installed all over the place, they have no reason to be there anymore and their maintenance is not performed any longer. Here we have the limits of the relations between land products and landscapes. The images contained by the products impose landscape references that their production cannot always ensure, because even if the elaboration procedures were kept, the entire system of the space use changed.

More pernicious are the imitation or pretence strategies performed by a certain number of economic actors and there are many myths to which the consumer can be object. The work of Claire Delfosse showed the ambiguities of the references to the cheeses of terroir, especially the role of the brands that evoke the idea of terroir, rather than a particular terroir (e.g. Chaume, Pavé d'Affinois, Terroir). This is the issue raised by the dual character of these products. They are at the same time concrete material and support for imagination. Or, if one can protect the material goods by means of regulations and of technical specifications, how could one prevent anybody from drawing something from the huge range of representations they contribute to introduce on the market?

It is also known that some countries in Northern Europe tend to use the names of terroir products as generic names; the Danish Roquefort business is still alive in our memories…More insidious is the vagueness on which some of the companies count and which allows them collecting abusively the extra-value of the terroir without risking any judicial proceedings. The case of the Aoste ham, directed in an Italian way, but produced in Aoste in the north of Isere in France is one of the best examples for it!

The local communities are not exempted from contradictions either; there are many departments or cities that fight upon the authorship of certain labels and the influence of local politicians is often decisive. In Franche-Comté, the limitation of the area of the "Mont-d'Or" to the Doubs department[2], while traditionally this cheese was elaborated as well very near in Jura, can also be astonishing.

The eponymous of the products, often urban, does not enable the delimitation of the geographic areas. The city of Morbier (Jura, France) has nowadays only one cheese factory where the costumer can buy Morbier cheese and to witness the making of the product, while this product is coming from a farm cheese elaborated in Mont Risoux and in the valley of Mouthe, before becoming almost a generic product made almost everywhere, up to Bretagne…but not at all in Morbier! The request to the INAO (National Institute of Appellation of Origin) for an AOC Morbier represented therefore an issue of spatial location, between economic, historic and natural factors. The choice of the name also caused some difficulties. Should one have questioned the use itself of the name of Morbier to the producers of pasteurized milk Morbier? This was definitely the best way to block the labelling, but with little acknowledgement for the producers thanks to whom the Morbier is nowadays known in France, in times when local producers had almost forgotten about it.

This kind of problem was encountered, with even more at stake, for one of the cheese labels in the Eastern France, i.e. for the Comté, whose geographic area was redefined. We witnessed at the beginning of the 2000s the elimination of the department Haute-Saône from the labelling area of the Comté. Or, this department had produced cheese for a long time and this cheese was of a good quality; there was nothing to criticize about the product itself. It was actually a conflict of image that the department of Haute-Saône was caught in. In fact, the "Comté landscape" was known along the years, especially by means of advertising, as a landscape of mountains or high plateaus, large pastures and fir forests, large isolated farms and pies-rouges Montbeliardes cows (the local race used for the production of milk for Comté), everything in a bioclimatic atmosphere presented as Northern. All of these things are absent from the Haute-Saône, a respectable department, but one with a hopelessly reasonable climate, where corn and rape are encountered much more often than meadows, where there are more Prim'Holsteins than Montbeliardes.

Even if the respective cheese is called Comté, not all the landscape from the Franche-Comté region is a "Comté" landscape.

[2] In France, the department is a kind of province

The administration of the proof

In such circumstances of overheated offer, the trend is to prove the authenticity, to surpass the administration of the evidences. It is a question of taking away the suspicion of forgery and of making more than the others in the direction of the genuine. Sign of time, nth phase of a cycle of the land products, the phenomenon was amplified by the European decisions taken at the beginning of the 90s. These stipulated indeed that the link of the product to the land must be clearly established, for the new Labels of protected origin (AOP), and even for the protected geographical indications (IGP), a more flexible device intended to gradually replace labels. Historians, ethnologists, pedologists, microbiologists, geographers are in this way strongly sought by the labor unions of products and launched into the search of the proofs, those of the age and of the usages, as well as that of the natural determiners.

The research of anteriority carried out by the Departmental Federation of the Dairy Cooperatives of Jura within the framework of the request of AOC Morbier showed the difficulties of such an initiative. When can we consider that a certain kind of cheese appears? When the name is mentioned for the first time, or when a similar product but with a different name or with no name at all is evoked by a text? If the letter of the citizen Droz to the citizen Parmentier evokes from 1799 a cheese which is probably the ancestor of the Morbier, it will be necessary to wait for 1892 before the naming of Morbier is applied to this cheese. Besides, the lack of an indication of a collective production does it mean that no manufacturing farmer existed? Finally, what places to grant to the oral testimonies reported by certain authors? The search for the historic legitimacy is very quickly associated to the construction of the myths.

The second axis of legitimization lies in the revealing of the environmental factors of the quality and the typical character. Several products are the object of works on the way the pédo-climatic characteristic of the land are passed on up to the perceptive system of the consumer. Until then collectively accepted in the field of wines, this organoleptic traceability begins to be established for other products as well, and in particular for cheeses. If the areas of cheese makers labeling are still essentially defined according to criteria of historic order, the identification of subgroups within the geographical area leans more and more on the geologic, pedological, climatic, even microbiological conditions reigning in the upstream of the product. The case of Comté is completely revealing of this trend.

The researches conducted under the aegis of the Technical Committee and of the Inter-professional Committee of Comté allowed characterizing six zones of Comté thanks to a work of sensory analysis carried out for more than five years starting from 91 descriptors of aromas. Besides, the data collected by Jean-Claude Monnet on the geologic substrata and the soil of about twenty dairy ponds of the label area allowed identifying a certain number of agro-pedological basic units, validated a posteriori from a functional point of view by the floristic analysis of pastures. Real zones of terroir could be distinguished and situated in space, and the geographical parts established in this way overlap those coming out of the sensory analysis. It allows getting to a preservation of the gustative information, starting from the flora of the pastures, to the animal which consumes it, to the milk, and finally to the elaborated cheese, on the condition of course for this to be allowed by the techniques of manufacturing.

This actually justifies the technical requirements of the Comté, in particular the ban on feeds come from elsewhere, fermented food and pasteurization of the milk, any processes which would break or would distort the gustative chain. The limitation of the collection of the milk to a 12,5 km area around every cheese dairy acts in the same way by fixing a scalar stitch in compliance with the spatiality of the agro-pedological units and their plant communities. Other contribution of these researches is to emphasize the determining role of certain characters of the soil and the subsoil in the floral differentiation. The agro-pedological units are distinguished by means of a certain combination of the hydric system of the bedrock and of the depth of the soil which could be prospected by the roots. This makes references to the topographic position and to the degree of cracking of limestones, connected to the tectonics and to the lithology.

In many respects, this work is exemplary, and the Comté sector can be proud of having been one of the first ones to validate scientifically its approach of typical character. In a way, it brings back to back patrimonialists and environmentalists. Indeed, if these terroirs present a potential wealth and variety signed by the nature, they can only offer the best of themselves if this potentiality is recognized, protected, claimed. This means the elaboration of a know-how allowing catching in a “capsule” the gustative information in order to pass it from the upstream to the downstream. This elaboration, at first scrabbled and empirical along the centuries then supervised by the scientific research nowadays, goes through the organization of a network, which has to manage the good as

possible the equation constraints-profits. Now, such a network has more chances to work well and to reproduce itself since it is anchored in a territorial system.

With 50 000 tons produced in 2008, the Comté is on the top of the list of labelled cheeses produced in France, followed by the Roquefort (19 000 t) and Cantal (18 000 t). The most surprising is that this production represents a kind of monster in the French and European food-processing industry as far as, although very important in volume, the Comté sector is situated at the opposite of the normal productivist and industrialist patterns. It thus represents an argument against these models and proves that another path is possible. Far from leading to the economic marginality, this path pays in a very satisfactory way its various actors, and contributes very strongly to keeping people and activities in a region little endowed for the other types of agricultural speculation. Comté is a part of these labelled cheese makers from mountaneous areas which base their strength on the respect for the relationship "product-terroir". Together with eight other cheeses from the eastern part of France which adopted similar strategies, it is affiliated to the National Federation of Controled Origin Labels, created in 1995 to bring together the most rigorous AOC cheese makers.

The production of Comté is in the same time traditional (the Comté comes from the Vachelin, the cheese elaborated in the Jura Mountains for centuries), binding, community and home-made. But the originality of the sector lies especially in its complex and original organization.

Basically, we count approximately 3 000 milk producing exploitations, located mainly in the mountain; they are medium-sized, mono-productive exploitations and rather endowed in dairy quotae. They are run by rather young and generally well trained farmers. If we observe the map of the files of installations of young farmers in the department of Doubs, we see that there is a strong relation between the number of exploitations of Comté and the number of installations. The sector possesses therefore a good rate of renewal of its exploitations.

The collected milk is treated in cheese dairies (approximately 170 workshops today) ; their cooperative principle goes back up to the Middle Age and strengthened in the nineteenth century. In these cheese dairies (“fruitières”) lies certainly all the strength of the sector. Indeed, the pooling of the milk to make the wheels of this big hard cheese (500 l for a wheel approximately) determined a lifestyle, a real culture and a strong attachment to the community and to the territory. A big part of the resistance of the actors from this country to the sirens of the industrial groups and the massive distribution results from this socio-spatial consciousness. In this perspective, the Comté system is comparable to the localized productive systems, with their local process of regulation and transmission, their scales of values, and their major figures, the presidents of cooperatives and these key-characters that the cheese makers are. The cheese dairy or the cheese dairies, because formerly there were several for each commune, were and still are often the heart of the village and of the social life, the place of exchange, discussion and resistance.

Finally, about twenty houses of refining bring the ultimate touch to the product by keeping the wheels in their cellars during four months at least, and by marketing them. They assure the connection of the local system with the outside world. All this system can work only thanks to a good payment for the various segments of the network. And this one turns out to be particularly profitable. For the breeders, the constraints of production are widely covered by the clear capital gain. Franche-Comté often holds the national record of the milk price in the region. This high price allows to maintain medium-sized exploitations and consequently farmers, who participate in the dynamism of the countryside in Franche-Comté.

The policy of the interprofessional committee actually has for objective to protect this sector still home-made against an excessive penetration of the industrial groups and the massive distribution. The industrial groups are already present for a long time in the region but on the other types of cheeses (Emmenthal cheese in particular), and are especially localized in the lower parts of the country. But today they are interested in the production of Comté and try to enter the sector. Confronted to the enormous importance of these structures which can transform more than 100 million liters a year while the craft workshops are situated between 1 and 5 million liters, the interprofessional committee has adopted for some years a policy of permanent going forward towards the quality and the specificity.

The technical requirements for the Comté are continuously being hardened; the intensification of the technical standards concerning the manufacturing process, the limitation of the areas of collection of workshops and of deadlines of renneting, the increase of the durations of refining, the definition of rigorous morphological and sensory criteria, everything contributes to make difficult a manufacturing of industrial type and to maintain this link at the same time powerful and vulnerable, between the product and the territory.

In conclusion,

we shall remember that a sector of food production with a strong typical character can work and can be preserved only on three conditions:

- Be organized in a joined way from the upstream to the downstream;
- Have offensive strategies on a business level and defensive from the point of view of the requirements;
- Join a territorial system, for which it becomes a widely acknowledged stake for the development.

In this respect Franche-Comté offers a configuration which can be used as a base for a scientific reflection. It has at its disposal several terroir products and their images can support themselves mutually, because these products are connected one to the other. We have thus a relation of temporality with the relation summer cheeses- winter cheeses, a relation of spatial order with the subtle organization of the geographical areas, and finally a technical relation, with the emergence of a quality porcine sector offering value to the image of the pig raised with the milk serum, the quality sub-product derived from the cheese manufacturing. Far from resolving everything, this networking of products, labels and images allows the region to reach a certain critical mass and facilitates its sustainable development.

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