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Thomas PARKER, *Tasting French Terroir, the History of an Idea*

University of California Press, Oakland, California, 229 p. ISBN: 978-0-520-27751-9

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This book convincingly develops the idea that the notion of “terroir” is not only a matter of food and agriculture. It first appeared when literature was written in the French language; Renaissance France began to construct a part of the country’s cultural identity by evoking the causal power of the land to create differences in food, language, and people. The author shows that food and language have shared the same debates over the last five centuries: local characteristics are either tolerated or promoted, or condemned and rejected, depending on the period. The notion of terroir also concerns people and issues such as who is French? Who are the best French? Are people determined by their ancestors or where they live? Can people adapt to a new environment when they move? Different answers have been offered over the centuries, often making comparisons with food products and plants and, more specifically, wine and vines. The idea that terroir is a matter of language and national identity as well as food and agriculture helps understand why the notion has been so widely used, not only by agronomists and geographers (Olivier de Serres and Vidal de la Blache) but also by poets, philosophers, and political thinkers (Rabelais, the Pléiade, Montaigne, Jean Bodin, Montesquieu, Rousseau, etc.).

Written in rich language and agreeable to read, the book includes a 13-page index and a bibliography of over 150 primary sources and 300 secondary sources. It is organized chronologically from the Renaissance onwards.

Chapter 1, “Rabelais’s Table and the Poets of the Pléiade,” explores how the footprint left by Rabelais’s fictional giants

still pervades France’s culinary identity. Rabelais succeeds in putting food, place, and identity center stage throughout his work. Renaissance poets of the Pléiade used images of wine and the vine as they endeavored to accentuate the distinctiveness of the French language, using it as a base on which to build an entire national identity. Du Bellay refers to word-smiths as agriculturalists. Gohory’s first French wine manual was written in French and published the same year as *Défense et illustration de la langue française* by Du Bellay (1549). Ronsard and Du Bellay emphasized the specific “flavor” that came from the communion between the poet and his home terrain, while for *L’Agriculture et la maison rustique* (Estienne, 1564), the foremost factor in understanding any given wine, was not the grape variety but the region of origin and terroir.

Chapter 2, “The Plantification of People,” explores the normative effect of terroir. Montaigne depicts terroir, along with air and climate, as having the power to determine the shape and character of human beings. Jean Bodin allows that people, like trees, adapt to the environment, and advocates that society should create a legislative structure to mitigate earth’s influence. The concept of terroir is central to Olivier de Serres’s *Théâtre d’agriculture*, where the word appears eighty-seven times. He credits terroir and not the grape for giving wines their different tastes and qualities. However, terroir is more often used in the technical context of deciding where to grow particular crops than in the context of culinary appreciation. For Renaissance authors, people rather than food were appreciated as “terroir driven.” They reinforced terroir as a polysemic notion in French.

Chapter 3, “Courtside Purity and the Académie Française’s Attack on Earth,” reports on the very different trajectory of terroir in the seventeenth century. As Louis XIV’s absolute power was continuously reaffirmed, the provinces and terroir took on sharply negative associations. Anything described as

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“tasting of the terroir” became a sign of rusticity and impurity. Terroir became “unclean” in relation to speech in seventeenth century France.

Chapter 4, “France’s Green Revolution: Terroir’s Expulsion from Versailles,” examines how nature was “denatured” as individuals sought to perfect it, notably in the gardens of Versailles. As the Académie Française began to codify language and purify it of its irregularities, individuals sought to use the garden as a representation of human autonomy and power over nature. The *Potager du Roi* was mastered into a terroirless place, planted on a site that had to be totally transformed. The King’s vegetable garden was in direct opposition to the notion of terroir as practiced by Olivier de Serres who invited his readers to respect nature’s limits.

Chapter 5, “Saint-Evremond and the Invention of Geographical Connoisseurship,” tells how Saint-Evremond, the most famous food snob of the seventeenth century, developed the practice of connoisseurship. However, for these connoisseurs, place-based eating was exactly the opposite of what we currently think of the notion. The best terroir was a terroir that left no earthy flavor; a connoisseur who admitted a fondness for a terroir product risked presenting a negative image of himself.

Chapter 6, “Terroir and Nation Building: Boulainvilliers, Du Bos, and the Case of Class,” explains a debate in the early eighteenth century, now largely forgotten. For Boulainvilliers, the prestige of French blood came from the Franks who invaded Gaul in the fifth century, and thus those descending from pure-blooded Franks were entitled to rule France. According to Du Bos, on the contrary, people, like fruits, are programmed by the terroir where they were raised or sown. Similarly, Montesquieu explicitly linked climate and soil quality to human behavior.

Chapter 7, “The Normalization of Terroir: Paris and the Provinces,” reflects on how, in the years leading up to the Revolution, terroir came to be part of what made a French person French. Terroir came back into fashion and made its entrance back into wine and food. Rousseau promoted the “superiority of terroir.” He called for natural flavors and produce grown in season, rejecting as inferior in ethics and culinary value anything that did not occur according to the natural cycle. According to the *Encyclopédie*, and in contrast to seventeenth century connoisseurs, wines “ought” to reflect their terroir. Chaptal, Rozier, Parmentier, and d’Ussieux made a distinction between the *goût naturel de terroir*, a welcome flavor in wine, and the *goût artificiel de terroir*, a defect. The *Sociétés d’agriculture* (the first was founded in Rennes in 1758) set the stage for terroir’s return from banishment. English gardens suddenly became popular. Jean-Marie Morel recommended that gardeners do not attempt to adapt plants from other areas. In 1789, the desire to remap France, designing a system of departments that broke down existing regions into areas easily governed by a central Parisian

government, raised the debate of how to draw up these departments. When Sieyès put forward a plan for the geometric configuration of departments of uniform size that would cut across France in eighty-one squares, Mirabeau (Honoré, not Octave...) was a strong advocate of a terroir-based division of France. He and others argued that nature should be respected, explicitly comparing human beings and plants. In 1803, Grimod la Reynière proposed a new sort of map with a graphic representation of France where identities would be based on regional food productions, while making clear that the tastes in Paris remained the best.

The conclusion “Terroir and Nation: From Geographic Identity to Psychogeography,” provides a short account of how this complex and polyvalent history influences modern ideas about terroir. As a sign that the discourse of terroir was thematically wedded to anthropological conceptions, the author recalls Rémy de Gourmont’s 1903 project, using climate and geology in identifying France’s writers. Thirty years before the creation of the AOC for wines, literary critics were drafting a set of expectations in terms of authors and their terroirs! Also in 1903, Vidal de la Blache published his *Tableau de la géographie de la France*, a key moment in terroir’s modern genesis.

The author concludes that twentieth-century practices of tasting terroir began hundreds of years ago and were shaped as much by literary, linguistic, and national identity considerations as by a priori “scientific” discourses.

This book can help the French to answer a question they sometimes ask about why other cultures and countries have not adopted the notion of terroir, even those who share with France the reality of terroir products. This book suggests that terroir *products* themselves are not a serious enough question to have justified the invention of the notion and the word.

French people are always surprised when they discover that the word “terroir” does not have an equivalent in other languages. However, this surprise rarely or never leads to examining the issue despite its being extremely interesting. It is often argued that New World countries do not have an old enough cultural history to have developed terroir products and that their local products have often been brought by immigrants. This does not, however, explain why older cultures with many highly valued local products, such as Italy (who registered more Geographical Indications than France), do not make use of the notion of terroir. How is it possible to produce and consume terroir products and even to manage a system of terroir products (with labeling and certification) without using the word? Would it be possible that the invention and wide use of terroir in French culture and language responds to other needs, foreign to the food and agriculture sphere? The author does not formulate the question in this way but provides a sensible answer: twentieth-century practices of tasting terroir began hundreds of years ago and were shaped as much by considerations in the realm of literature, language, and national identity as by a

priori “scientific” discourses. In fact, this concept and the word have been used for hundreds of years in France to describe how flavor and personality in a product are determined according to its specific region or origin. But the French have taken it further: they posited that terroir affects not only the cheese but also the cheesemaker, not only the produce but also the farmer. This phenomenon is what this book set out to investigate. We travel with the author through five centuries of literature and the history of ideas, meeting authors that we would not spontaneously associate with terroir such as Ronsard and du Bellay, Montaigne, Voltaire, and Rousseau.

Another fact emerging from this research is that terroir is certainly a French notion, but it has, on numerous occasions in the last five centuries, been fought and counterbalanced by strong opposition. One should not conclude from the fact that terroir is a French notion that “terroir practice” is stronger in France than elsewhere. The opposition between Olivier de Serres’ terroir agronomy and La Quintinie’s terroirless *Potager du Roi* is probably still a key to understanding the evolution of agronomy in France and the debate it encapsulates. Although France has 246 cheeses, it is also the country where the most powerful monarch decided to establish a garden in a place where a stinking pond lay, as well as a country that considered drawing up departments as 81 geometric squares (Sieyès’s 1789 proposal). In de Gaulle’s question (with which this book opens), “How can you expect to govern a country with 246 kinds of cheese?,” one can hear the echo of Descartes, the Académie Française, Louis XIV, and Sieyès, and nostalgia for a terroirless country, far easier to govern because land and people are the same everywhere.

As a hypothesis, we may note that in a country such as Italy—whose linguistic and political unity occurred far later—terroir and local products did not encounter such opposition, so there was no need to invent the name and the notion. A comparative study of the two countries would be very interesting and useful.

In other words, France is structured by a dialectical (a word that the author does not use) relation to terroir: “it gained as much definition from being cast into *opprobrium* as it did from being held in esteem, and this tension entrenched it all the deeper in the French imagination.”

A remarkable achievement of this dialectic is the French AOC system, which can be seen as a synthesis between terroir and codification: local products are defined and their name protected by a national system (now a European Union one). The terroir dialectic is still active within the system. Since this book begins with an anecdote about cheeses, we can end this review with another: France is the birthplace of the world’s largest industrial cheese and milk group (Lactalis), which in 2007 tried to change the code of practice of *Camembert AOC de Normandie*. The firm wanted to be allowed to make the cheese not only from raw milk but also from thermized milk. Arguing that thermizing milk would kill the local microbiological flora responsible for the link to origin, many smaller producers as well as cow breeders, and soon many journalists, chefs, and foodies, raised the flag of terroir and finally rejected this assault. That France can be a battlefield for a reason such as this, and set the world’s largest (and French) industrial cheese and milk group against terroir partisans, can be seen as an indication that the idea of terroir lives on....