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Xabier Itçaina, Antoine Roger, Andy Smith, 2016,
Varietals of Capitalism: A Political Economy
of the Changing Wine Industry
Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 266 p.

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Varietals of Capitalism is a theoretically driven and empirically-rich examination of the political economy of the 2008 reform of EU wine policy. It asks two key research questions: why reform took place, and why at that particular time. In order to do so, the authors painstakingly trace the process of change for at least two decades before the reform was approved, and follow its implementation as well. Empirically, the research behind the book is mostly based on secondary sources and a limited number of interviews. The geographic scope of the analysis is multi-layered: while the core focus is reform at the EU level, when it comes to scientific, economic, and bureaucratic processes, the authors draw specifically on the experiences of four EU countries (France, Spain, Italy and Romania) and of various regions and geographic appellations within these countries.

The theoretical approach proposed by the authors, labelled ‘structural contingency’, is presented as an alternative to institutional economics, regulationist economics, sociological institutionalism and actor-network theory. It draws from historical institutionalism, but places more focus on implementation and legitimation, and on constructivist institutionalism, from which it conceives institutions and institutional change as socially constructed and shaped by ideational conditions and processes. The theory of structural contingency delineated in *Varietals of Capitalism* is built upon three elements: (1) it conceives an industry as an ‘institutional order’—a hybrid of jurisdiction, framework for economic strategy and space for social process—which is built around institutionalized relationships of employment, finance, sourcing and commerce; (2) it borrows Bourdieu’s economic, scientific and bureaucratic ‘fields’ to examine their interactions and ‘accidental resonances’—the idea being that ‘each field is structured around specific issues, but the entire set of positions in one field may at times coincide

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with the balance of power in another' (p. 45); and (3) it draws attention to the 'political work' that underpins struggles in fields and institutionalized relationships by highlighting (à la Weber) three political processes: problematization of issues, conversion of problems into policy and legitimization of both problems and policy.

Having delineated their approach in the 'Introduction' and 'Part I' of the book ('Chapters 1 and 2'), 'Part II' examines in detail the processes behind negotiating and shaping the 2008 EU wine reform. 'Chapter 3' delineates how the ideational creation of the 'new consumer' was key in preparing the ground for reform. The new consumer was portrayed as demanding more standardized and predictable wine, year after year—something that 'New World' wine producers were better equipped to deliver given their less regulated wine industries, thus threatening European producers. This chapter also shows how changes in the scientific field—driven by emerging networks of biochemistry, economics and marketing scholars in the USA, Australia and South Africa—coincided in structured but also contingent ways with the interests of specific segments of the wine industry. 'Chapter 4' chronicles how the political work of wine merchants (and certain groups of grape growers) made it possible to transfer changes taking place in the scientific field to the economic field. This process was facilitated by a revolution in wine retailing in Europe (with much of it moving into supermarkets), the increasing importance of branding (vis-à-vis geographic appellations) in wine marketing, and increased concentration in wine trading and to some extent grape growing. 'Chapter 5' focuses on how changes in the scientific and economic fields also shaped the bureaucratic field. The authors observe that the reform of wine policy in the EU was quick and happened with relatively limited opposition. They highlight how the Commissioner and a new set of officials in the Wine Unit of DG-AGRI were instrumental in its success. Instead of technicizing reform (as usually is the case in the EU), they politicized reform and strategically used participation and consultation processes to obtain approval from the Council of Ministers and the EU Parliament for most of their proposals.

'Part III' of *Varietals of Capitalism* examines the process of implementation of the EU wine reform, focusing on processes of legitimation. 'Chapter 6' explains how old policy instruments (distillation subsidies, grants for grubbing out vines, and plantation rights) were delegitimized, leading to their abandonment or only partial retaining—not without resistance, especially in France. 'Chapter 7' examines the re-categorization of wines involved in the EU reform, which included a simplification of categories for geographic indication wines (into geographic indication and non-geographic indication wines) and the reinvention of 'table wines' to be sold with the indication of brand names and grape varieties. 'Chapter 8' analyzes the new support measures included in the EU wine reform—subsidies for marketing in third countries and intrafirm investment support—and the way they were appropriated by individual, powerful actors at the expense of collective action.

In the Conclusion chapter, the authors argue that the EU wine reform cannot be attributed to a simple neoliberal logic. While it led to the demise of some old instruments, it also allowed the reiteration of others and the launch of new forms of support. Reform, they argue, was shaped by a main shift from an institutionalized order based on supply to one based on demand. It was preconditioned by displacements in scientific, economic and bureaucratic fields that are structured but also molded by coincidental resonances. And it was delivered through

political work applied to problematization, instrumentalization and legitimization processes.

Varietals of Capitalism is an important and interesting read for those who are interested in institutional processes, regulatory reform, and industry dynamics well beyond the case study of wine. The empirical chapters are very rich in detail and structured along a clear theoretical path. More extensive use of quotes from interviews, especially in the first half of the book, could have made the read a bit more engaging, but in general the authors provide a compelling analysis of the reform process. A more robust discussion of methodological choices would have strengthened the main argument—the selection of the four countries (and of specific regions and appellations within them) is not well justified, and it would have been helpful to have a better picture of which interviews were carried out where and with what kinds of interviewees (the information provided is quite vague). Also, the book makes use of empirical material on France and Spain much more than from Italy and Romania, especially in the first half, without a justification.

The theory of structural contingency will need to be applied to other empirical settings to assess its further applicability and robustness. One of its main current limitations is its inability to identify conditions or factors that can explain various forms and degrees of structuration which can shape the likelihood that ‘contingencies’ make a difference. In absence of this development, it remains difficult to distinguish structural contingencies from random factors that can only be ascertained *ex post*. It does not help that the authors insist in positioning their theoretical approach as ‘going beyond’ a long list of other approaches, not only in the theory chapters but also in others. The book engages in too many theoretical debates, includes too many positioning statements, and often misrepresents or over-simplifies the theories it criticizes. Finally, while the catchy title is a smart pun on the Varieties of Capitalism discussion in political economy, the book does not really engage with it, missing an opportunity to explore whether ‘structural contingency’ operates differently in possibly diverse ‘wine capitalisms’. Despite these limitations, *Varietals of Capitalism* provides an important contribution to political economy, highlighting the complex structural, ideational and political processes that come to play in the formation and implementation of public policy and in the restructuring of industries.