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Thomas Parker, *Tasting French Terroir: The History of an Idea*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. xii + 229 pp. \$70.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-520-27750-2; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-520-27751-9.

Review by Rod Phillips, Carleton University.

Anyone who reads the wine media—or even the back labels of wine bottles—will be familiar with the way that *terroir* is used to market wine. Usually referring to the environment (notably the soil, climate, and exposure) of grape vines, *terroir* is often described as influencing or determining the style of the wines made from the grapes that grow there. Some people expand the meaning of *terroir* beyond the environment to include the traditions of viticulture and the work of the people who work the land, but most focus on the environment, and tend to privilege the soil and its substrata.

Although *terroir* is a French concept that was often dismissed as simply a way of justifying claims that French wine was superior to all others, it has been widely adopted by vinticulturists, winemakers, wine writers, and marketers elsewhere in Europe and throughout the new world in the last two or three decades. For many it has become an article of oenological faith that *terroir* underlies wine quality and that fine wines, in particular, are defined by their *terroirs*. The recent book by Mark A. Matthews has attracted a lot of hostility in the wine media for calling into question the basic principles of the notion that wines are *terroir*-driven.[1] In *Wine Spectator*, wine writer Matt Kramer responds to Matthews's argument (phrased in Kramer's words) that, "*Terroir* is a myth promulgated by romanticists such as wine writers and cynical marketing sorts seeking to distinguish their wines from those of the competition," with: "All I can say is this: Taste some wine. Is a good Chablis really the same as any other Chardonnay grown in a comparably cool climate, never mind whether the soil is chalk or clay or sand? Really?"[2] Meanwhile in *The World of Fine Wine*, Jamie Goode writes that the title of Matthews's book is "deliberately provocative to the point of absurdity. After all, the concept of *terroir* lies at the heart of fine wine." [3]

Matthews was far from the first to question basic tenets of *terroir* theory. In a series of articles soil scientist Alex Maltman demonstrated that grape vines do not take up flavors and other attributes from the soil and transfer them via grapes to wine. He has questioned widely-used terms such as "minerality" and the supposed origin of these qualities in vineyard soil structure.[4] His work, like Matthews's and the contributions of other scholars, has led to a vigorous debate on the meaning and usefulness of the notion of *terroir* and, more broadly, the role of science in understanding wines. Many wine writers, firmly wedded to the concept of *terroir*, respond that science may prove this or disprove that, but that it remains indisputable that the growing conditions in, for example, the most prestigious vineyards of Burgundy produce some of the world's greatest wines, whereas other vineyards do not.

Enter Thomas Parker's innovative and revealing history of the idea of *terroir*. It is unlikely to change anyone's mind about the usefulness of *terroir* as an explanation of wine quality in the modern world. Parker doesn't take a position on *terroir* (nor did he need to), but he has done us the valuable service of

providing a comprehensive, long-term history of it as an idea in France, where it first took root. At the very least, this history of discontinuities undermines the commonly held notion that French winemakers have appreciated *terroir* in the modern sense for centuries, perhaps for millennia.

Parker convincingly demonstrates that *terroir* is a multifaceted concept that historically applied not only to wine—indeed, often not very much to wine—but much more to languages, plant life, collective human character, aesthetics, and food. Moreover, *terroir* was, for long periods, considered a negative influence on whatever it underlay: at those times, one avoided *terroir* whenever possible. To this extent, the current usages of *terroir* that focus on wine and are invariably *terroir*-positive are relatively recent iterations in the long history of the idea that Parker so ably sets out.

Parker starts by tracing the etymology of *terroir* to *territorium* (a territory), a cultural/political reference, rather than to its usually cited origin in *terra* (soil). This is an important point of departure because it immediately places *terroir* within the realms of political and cultural discourse as much as within the scope of soil, an element of nature. For all that many French wine professionals now focus on *terroir* as soil (and sometimes climate), the architects of France's Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) system, the basis of France's wine law in the twentieth century, focused on just that territorial meaning of *terroir*. When appellations were defined from 1919 onwards (and in more comprehensive form from 1935), they largely followed the political boundaries of *départements* and communes, not patterns of soil structure and climate. (In contrast, the later American and other new world appellation systems follow soil/climate definitions by defining Geographical Indications in terms of soil and topography, as well as of histories of winemaking and styles of wine.[5])

But despite the close association of *terroir* and wine today, the early discussions of *terroir* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries focused on human characteristics and languages as much as anything else. Montaigne, among other early modern writers, argued that earth, air, and climate had the power to determine human character—not only in physical, but also in intellectual and moral respects. This was a principle repeated over and over by the writers Parker cites, sometimes in analytical form, sometimes in crass statements to the effect that the inhabitants of one region are thieves and the inhabitants of another are indolent.

Although some writers stressed the importance of the earth, the air that humans breathed also came into play, as it was infused with the minerals and compounds exuded by the earth. Climate, which is the particularities of air (warmth, moisture, movement), was also important, and a significant part of the early modern (and later) discourse on *terroir* was shaped by the well-known climatic determinism of Montesquieu and others.

Parker places the discussions of *terroir* firmly within contemporary political conditions. When the French monarchy began its centralizing project, *terroir* had to be suppressed, as it was an emanation of regional distinctiveness. Regional languages, for example, were considered emanations of *terroir*. They were deplored as base and corrupt, and regional stereotypes of long-standing were invoked. In contrast, the French spoken in the Île-de-France, the Paris region that became the center of political and cultural power was considered free of any taint of *terroir*. This position on regional languages was expressed in a different way during the French Revolution, another period of anxiety about regionalism. Instead of regional languages being inferior because they were *terroir*-based, they could be politically dangerous.[6]

Parker shows that, within the discussion of *terroir*, there was an enduring belief that some regions gave off more *terroir* than others, and the concept was a constantly shifting cultural ground whose meaning generally depended on whether *terroir* was perceptible. There was a general sense that the Île-de-France was more neutral than other regions, and it would be interesting to know if there was a ranking of regions by *terroir*—whether some were more *terroir*-driven than others. Extremes of climate are often

invoked as having more dramatic impacts on human character than more temperate, equable climates, but then the *terroir* of Bourgogne (which hardly has extremes of climate) was often identified as being particularly powerful—a belief that wine producers in Bourgogne later exploited.

In linguistic terms, French from the Paris region was often said to be *terroir*-free (the inhabitants of other regions spoke with an accent or spoke a foreign language), which justified policies to make it the standard language of the nation. But this went beyond language, and products believed to lack the taste of *terroir* were considered superior. In the early eighteenth century, the sparkling wines of Champagne had a far higher cultural value than wines from Bourgogne in aristocratic quarters; burgundies, being flavorful and earthy, reeked of *terroir*, while champagnes were not only light and lively, making them appropriate for the intellectually vivacious aristocracy, but were *terroir*-neutral.

Lifting their eyes from France to survey the world more generally, some writers argued that France, a country with a temperate climate, was less influenced by *terroir* than other regions. Marl, a mixture of chalk and clay, thought to underlie all Champagne's vineyards, was also fundamental to the argument, for it was believed to produce the lightness and vivacity both of the region's wines and its people. Others, such as Du Bos, argued that the presence of marl throughout France made the French superior to other nationals.

Against the long-expressed hostility to *terroir* and the *goût de terroir*, the eighteenth century saw a more general appreciation of regionalism and the sense of *terroir* that accompanied it. Rousseau was at the fore of a movement that viewed *terroir* as an expression of nature. His embrace of *terroir* in *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* represented an important shift in attitudes toward *terroir* and it prepared the ground for Louis de Jaucourt (in his entry on wine in the *Encyclopédie*) to suggest that wines ought to reflect the *terroirs* from which they came.

Coming to the Revolution, Parker looks at the role of *terroir* in the spatial reconfiguration of political France into *départements* in 1789-1790, and suggests that the new boundaries represented a compromise between those who wanted to respect the pre-Revolutionary divisions of France and those who wanted to start from scratch. Here as elsewhere, however, there is a bit of slippage between the terms "*terroir*," "territory," and "space," and it is not clear how consistently *terroir*, in any recognizable sense, was invoked. Certainly, *départements* were named for geographical features, but a look at the decisions on final *départemental* boundaries suggests that the criteria were pragmatically political.

The bulk of the book is a nuanced and thoughtful discussion of the idea of *terroir* from the sixteenth to the end of the late eighteenth centuries but, apart from the discussion of the *départements*, there is little on the Revolutionary period and the way its governments wrestled with regionalism, including the issue of language that is important to Parker's discussion of *terroir* to this point. As well, there is a long gap in Parker's narrative between the immediate post-Revolutionary period and the early twentieth century—a period when, Parker writes, the word "*terroir*" "remained judiciously avoided" (p. 153). Given that *terroir* had taken on positive meanings before the Revolution and that the concept was by then "built inexorably into the French imagination as a way of framing itself as a country," it is surprising that it gets so little attention (p. 153).

If the word "*terroir*" was "judiciously avoided" during the long nineteenth century, we would surely want some suggestions as to why. But even if the word disappeared, the idea and its connotations were surely present in myriad forms. There were the attempts by successive regimes, especially the Third Republic, to promote standard French to replace regional languages, and there is the prevailing sense of nostalgia in the *fin de siècle* that lamented the loss of regional cultures. These had a bearing on the idea of *terroir*, unless nineteenth-century commentators dropped the connections between *terroir*, culture, and language. In other words, it's not clear whether the word or the idea disappeared.

As far as wine was concerned, one of the big issues of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (before, during, and after phylloxera) was counterfeiting: the representation of wines from one place (*terroir*) as coming from another. In Bourgogne, the practise of *équivalence* was permitted until the 1920s. *Négociants* could label wine with the name of any of Bourgogne's communes as long as they believed it tasted like a wine from that commune. It was practices such as these, which threatened the idea of *terroir* and led to the AOC system. *Terroir* was also front and center of the image of the noble *vigneron* that was constructed and exploited by the producers of Bourgogne in the 1920s and 1930s, as Philip Whalen and others have shown.^[7]

Although Parker's conclusion briefly references some of the discussion of *terroir* in the 1920s and 1930s, it is by no means as comprehensive as his treatment of the early modern period, which is where his work is located. It means that the last two centuries of *terroir* need to be written, for this is a partial history of it as an idea. Parker might have been clearer about his decision to stop where he did. I am not suggesting at all, however, that he ought to have pursued the history through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or that his work is the poorer for having stopped in the late eighteenth. This is a wide-ranging, thoroughly researched, and well-articulated work. *Terroir* was anything but a stable concept during the three or four centuries that Thomas Parker studies, and it is his achievement to have found order in what seems a chaotic series of contradictory commentaries.

NOTES

[1] Mark A. Mathews, *Terroir and Other Myths of Winegrowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

[2] Matt Kramer, "It's All Just Myths, You See," [winespectator.com](http://mobile.winespectator.com/360content/show/id/53034).
<http://mobile.winespectator.com/360content/show/id/53034>

[3] Jamie Goode, "Myth Misery: Is scientific evidence always absolutely necessary?" *World of Fine Wine* 52(2016): 54.

[4] See, for example, A. J. Maltman, "The Role of Vineyard Geology in Wine Typicity," *Journal of Wine Research* 19/1(2008): 1-17.

[5] "Geographical Indication" is the term for the name or sign used on products that correspond to a specific geographical location and possess qualities or a reputation associated with that location.

[6] Patrice Higonnet, "The Politics of Linguistic Terror and Grammatical Hegemony during the French Revolution," *Social History* 5/1(1980): 41-69.

[7] Philip Whalen, "'A Merciless Source of Happy Memories': Gaston Roupnel and the Folklore of Burgundian *Terroir*," *Journal of Folklore Research* 44/1(2007): 21-40.

Rod Phillips
Carleton University
roderick.phillips@carleton.ca

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