

Terroir

This French term has no equivalent in English. In French the word, which is related to the word territoire, and also recalls "terre" (land, soil) is variously used to refer to a portion of terrestrial space, a physical unit, a "«territory»" shaped by man, a finage, or rural district or parish specific to an agricultural community, a product or a particular social feature that is singularly rural (such as an "accent du terroir" (local accent), "produits du terroir" (local produce) etc). In rural geography it tends to be defined as a homogenous portion of agricultural surface area possessing specific agricultural potential and qualities: it has been appropriated, developed and valorised by a social group, in particular using skills established via usage; it has the ability to express its natural potential via a product, most often a foodstuff, widely recognised as typical and indigenous. It is in this perspective that INAO (Institut National de l'Origine et de la Qualité), has proposed an "operational" and pluri-disciplinary definition, according to which "a terroir is an delineated geographical space in which, in the course of its history, a human community accumulates collective production skills, based on a system of «interactions» between a physical and biological environment and a set of human factors. The socio-technical itineraries that come into play in this setting impart a typicality, and generate a reputation for the goods/produce originating from the geographical space in question". While it is possible to question the restrictive notions of "reputation" or "delineation", - since such boundaries may not be formal, and are always subject to decision from above; it can be agreed that the terroir is a complex system made up of a chain of natural and social factors leading to the final product or "produit du terroir".

-Between Nature and Culture

As early as the Middle Ages the word had two meanings: on the one hand a fairly restricted portion of land, a "country" (as in the meaning given by writers such as Arthur Young in his Travels), leading to usages such as "territory" (for certain historians or tropicalists) or finage in reference to a community; and on the other hand a portion of land with its particular agricultural qualities or potential, which may also have been shaped by the action of man, according to the techniques used over time. European "ruralist" geographers long made use of this second meaning on micro-local scale, in particular for wine-growing. However as early as 1949, M. Derruau widened the notion to refer to a territory developed and shaped by man, referring to "a cultivated territory that differentiates itself from neighbouring areas by specific features that can be physical or human: a particular type of relief, a micro-climate, or else a local climate, a soil, a plot layout, and an agricultural usage". A. Fel (1962) adds a cultural dimension, indicating that "peasant (rural) language is able to find very precise words to refer to these elementary types of terroir; cam, cãtes, puechs, combes and sagnes make up the logical string of terroirs".

A second approach, inherited from the first meaning, is more socio-cultural, putting emphasis on practices, techniques and skills belonging to a terroir, which is thus seen above all as an appropriated "territory", constructed by a group of individuals exercising a degree of power (via set standards or regulations), and sharing social representations and an intimate relationship with the "places" that shape its identity. Terroirs are constructs that are apprehended by way of these identity markers and an ambition for enhancement; they are sometimes "the fruit of collective action", and may be appropriated intentionally. This dimension of research in the social sciences developed from the 1980s and 1990s, and attempts have been made to link terroir to economic, socio-cultural, landscape and historical contexts, as well as to environmental issues (agro-systems). Terroir and territory can thus be mutually inclusive, and be construed via interactive dynamics exhibiting complex strategies of organisation, domination, exclusion and governance; they construct perceptions and representations locally, and also among outside "consumers", for instance city-dwellers looking for "authenticity", and associating, in a now positive collective imagination, quality, local produce, "natural" ingredients, national heritage and terroir.

-Terroir, territory and finage

Geographers remain circumspect towards the popularisation of the concept of terroir, and they emphasise the importance of scale. If an agronomic homogeneous terroir, defined according to natural criteria, is interpretable on a fine scale, does its "local" dimension actually correspond to a social and territorial logic? Conversely, on medium and small scale it is generally a combination or association of juxtaposed terroirs that is the rule, in cases where a specific benefit or the "territorialisation" of the quality of a production are recognised. The link between quality and the specific features of a terroir belong in fact more to a social geography (territory, the interaction of its various players, its power balance, translated into legal decisions) than to measurable "ecological"

characteristics. It can also be noted that territorial appropriations of terroirs by human communities can be diachronic or synchronic. There have been cases of poly-territorialisation of a single geographical space made up of several terroirs (complex pastoral or nomadic systems, complex user rights etc), sometimes leading to conflicts for use or governance. When used by "tropicalist" geographers the term terroir has been applied to the "portion of land appropriated, developed and used by the group that lives there and draws subsistence from it (P. Pélissier, G. Sautter, Pour un Atlas des Terroirs Africains, 1964). This approach has led to some confusion with the term finage mentioned above, which European "ruralists" have attempted to popularise precisely to refer to land that is administered and used by an agricultural entity (village, isolated farm). This supposes "collective control of a legal nature, that human groups, when mobile or poorly articulated, are not always in a position to exercise over their surrounding space" in tropical areas. In the wake of demographic growth and the development of commercial systems, whether local or agro-industry, a land ownership transition is occurring, involving land-acquisition or land-grab strategies (privatisation), and the precise outlining of farm boundaries: in this instance the shift from terroir to finage appears more relevant (P. Pélissier, 1995).

-Products from the terroir and the social construction of quality

We must now consider the "produits du terroir", goods or commodities that, by way of their particular features, circumscribe a territory with boundaries that are more or less clear cut, in which the goods are obtained in homogeneous manner: that is to say they are produced and/or processed and/or manufactured using skills that have been handed down, and thus belong to the collective heritage. The product may even carry the name of the territory, or of a particular location where it is made, and thus serve as an official sign of identification, and even quality. Nevertheless, there are other products complying with food safety, nutritional and organoleptic requirements, subject to officially controlled standards, in the same way as foods with a label specifying origin, that are not linked to any particular terroir. In contrast, AOC or PDO labels (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée in France, Protected Designation of Origin for Europe) and the PGI label (Protected Geographical Indication) are applied to quality agricultural products that have special relationships with the territories in which they are obtained. In France, INAO is in charge of compliance with "links with terroir" and their institutional recognition, in a complex system of nested scales from local to global. This is a delicate matter in the setting of globalisation of exchanges and negotiations in the WTO, where various institutions are attempting to involve intellectual property rights, with the support of the pressure group OriGIN (Organisation for and International Geographical Indication Network). However, from a strategic point of view, the drive to qualify a product is played out locally, where the main adjustments and conflicts between two dynamics generally occur: there is a bottom-up dynamic that is part of a more or less robust territorialised social complex, which seeks a compromise between strict tradition and innovation; the top-down dynamic attempts to apply norms, standards and methods by way of technical services and agro-industry supervision. This interplay on different scales, in a search for solidarities, mediations, and shared and accepted rules, is how the governance of terroirs and quality are constructed socially, and can go on to achieve a form of "local development".

Laurent Rieutort

Bibliographie