

Terroir and Catalonia

Robert A. Davidson
University of Toronto

Taste has become the new 'space'.

While cultural studies have dramatically and steadily expanded their purview, melding geography to literature, psychoanalytic discourse to architecture and creating scores of other new constellations, the everyday—or the common and mundane—, which has long been treated in the works of theorists as varied as Simmel, Benjamin, Kracauer, de Certeau and Lefebvre, has now seen its confirmation as a theoretical posture and subject in and of itself. The arrival and perhaps fashionable passing already of the everyday is patent not only in the form of academic readers¹ but also in a plethora of specialised books and articles and in a continued cross fertilization of disciplines that seeks to discover new territory to bring under the critical lens. That the codification of the many theories of the quotidian has also manifested in the form of an exaltation of sensory experience beyond the often employed 'gaze' suggests that the return to praxis that post-theory's fetishising of ethics has posited is not totally confined to the grim and apocalyptic. For even as Jameson direly observed in *The Seeds of Time*—and rightly so—that 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism' (Jameson xii), I suggest that in the ethical turn towards action, and its concomitant and inevitable inclusion of North/South divisions as markers, the very connection to the earth has presented itself—again—as a concept that bears more study, this time ostensibly detached from ideologies of national socialism. Thus, just as geographical jargon splintered and was applied to varying disciplines in the service of compelling and still ongoing investigations into space, so does the concept of cultural geography open the door to reading the land and our real or imagined

¹ See, for example, Highmore's *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* and Moran's *Reading the Everyday*.

links to it in a new light. As hedonistic as it may seem, I propose the notion of *terroir* as a vehicle for just this type of investigation into the way that taste and space have come together and allowed the former to begin to eclipse the latter.

In this essay I lay the groundwork for an exploration of the connections between the continuing articulation of Catalan nationalism's ties with the land and the elusive, yet suggestive concept of *terroir*. This piece thus serves as an introduction to a larger project: one that will range from a reconsideration of the much-studied links between the *Renaixença* and geography through to the revitalisation of the local market system in Barcelona, the boom in wine production originating in the Priorat (with its revalorisation of vertiginous hillsides and indigenous grape varieties such as *carinyena* and *monastrell* in addition to *garnatxa*) and, ultimately, the Ferran Adrià phenomenon and its effect on the local. My argument here is that through the growing practice of officially 'denominating' areas and products as having a fundamental difference attached to their produce and practice, the Catalan government is engaging in a new relationship with the rural that, while directly connected to supranational practices of contemporary high end food marketing, also points to an awareness of new discourses regarding the civics and ethics of consumption.

As regards the Generalitat's specific strategies, I consider the deployment of the *Denominació d'Origen Protegida* system and similar types of qualifications and contend that through such a practice one may discern a compelling tension between local specificity and global market forces that reveals a new way of literally packaging the nation. In this sense, I suggest that *terroir* comes to mean more than its popular understanding in wine and coffee circles, but rather embodies as well desire, bureaucracy, and a bulwarking of local frontiers that seek to be ratified at a global level even as international markets and consumption patterns undermine many of those same borders in other ways. It is my belief that the study of these systems (and the foodstuffs to which they refer) offers important insights into the continued evolution of Catalan nationalism in the light of spatial practices that may originate with the Generalitat, the EU and even the

WTO but are ultimately enacted in the everyday by the consumer/citizen.

Defining the Earth

At its most basic, *terroir* refers to the special characteristics that a particular geographical area imparts to the food products that are cultivated there. This transmission of the taste of a parcel of land—especially in wine, coffee or cheese—has been the most common usage for term. However, as the *Guide Hachette*, one of the almanacs of French oenology points out, the notion of *terroir viticole* is really an umbrella concept that, in addition to types of soil (schist, gravel, etc), comprises also the variety of grape cultivated, the weather specific but also extraordinary to that land, and the way that the vines are treated during the season; are the leaves thinned to allow more sun? Is there a green harvest to concentrate the flavours in the remaining fruit? And so on. These factors, while noticeable for many are still highly subjective and often the bailiwick of experts; the difference between different regional Bordeaux wines, for example, is not so great or immediately recognisable that many consumers will notice. Such subjectivity points to a necessary initiation or apprenticeship so as to access the expert level and, presumably acquire the required category for an appreciation of the intricacies of *terroir*. That said, even though the extent to which *terroir* trumps other factors in the elaboration of a product may be unclear, it continues to gain traction amongst Western connoisseurs and regular consumers alike as part of the growing predilection for local foodstuffs and sustainable, organic agricultural practices. Here is where the *Guide Hachette*'s almost throwaway comment that one must add human, historical, and commercial factors to one's understanding of *terroir* is highly suggestive in that it extends the sense of place inherent to the term to the spatial practices of production and consumption as well (10).

In the swirling, centre-less discourses of post- or supermodernity 'place' became a casualty of deconstruction. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, though, I think that it is safe to say that a return to a sense of place—to a heightened appreciation of and

regard for a specificity of experience—has manifested across disciplines and even within the expanding rubric of a cosmopolitanism that many predicted would defeat utterly locality on all fronts. Examples of this focussing are diverse yet instructive: boutique hotels, for instance, have exploded onto the hospitality scene, offering travellers who can afford it what is often billed as a unique experience in much the same way that the grand hotels of the pre-war period did; at the macropolitical level Europe has seen its constitution rejected in key constituencies as citizens place their bets with their own states rather than with a distant sovereignty emanating from Brussels; further afield, indigenous groups in Latin America have become capacitated politically; and slowly, in the North, one can perceive a shift towards locally grown and controlled produce; ‘organic’ is now not only a mantra for chemical free living but also a powerful marketing tool. Even French anthropologist Marc Augé’s celebrated ‘non-places’ rebel against their homogeneity in concerted efforts to stand out in a marketplace that has come to reward qualified difference. Of course, for the working classes, largely excluded from academic arguments about deconstruction, the sense of place never left. Hotel and airport workers, for example, do not experience where they work as a non-place in the same way that the non-exilic who travels by choice does. Furthermore, the displaced—especially economic migrants—maintain an even more nuanced and complex sense of the local, one that is articulated through remittances and the replication of cultural codes and mores abroad. Cosmopolitan consumption has feasted and is now looking for new dishes; ignored until now, they are to be found right under its nose.

Small local producers in the North—of food, of knowledge—have not been waiting around to be rediscovered. They have had to contend with the loss of privileged markets that neo-liberal economic policies have wrought and in many cases have had to deal also with increasing bureaucracy as the push for global integration and competition from the South and large scale domestic producers puts pressure on their bottom lines. This, while the human resources integral to the continuation of local traditions and artisanal practices abandon depressed or rural regions in pursuit of opportunities elsewhere. An increase in the perceived value of unique products

connected to the growth and importance of *terroir* as both paradigm and practice, as well as a willingness on the part of consumers to buy into it, has helped stem the tide.²

Terroir and its employment as a tool to increase consumption of certain products, then, responds to changing market conditions even as it helps prime them through an inherent value-added element that is not dissimilar to the honorific aura of the handmade that Veblen (2003) describes in his famous treatise on conspicuous consumption. But *terroir* is also a very compelling philosophical idea that speaks to the intricate dynamics between essence and perception and the manner in which a determined political engagement in the everyday practices that constitute secular citizenship may mediate and interrogate the two. It is at this new intersection between theory and praxis that I wish to center my analysis of the evolving importance of ‘the land’ and its concomitant changing tastes in the development of Catalan nationalism.

Terroir’s foundation in both the sensorial and the traditions of the quotidian inflects its defining duality of singularity on the one hand, and a potential to be exported beyond the crucial geographical site that is the source of its essence, on the other. As an example of what this entails, consider the so-called ‘Lleida pear.’ This pear, which is the fruit of the *Pyrus communis* L. species, grows in western Catalonia and has been ‘denominated’ or identified as being of special origin by the Catalan government. Every pear that grows inside the borders of its determined area and comes from the *Llimonera*, *Blanquilla* and/or *Conference* varieties is considered to be a *pera de Lleida*; as such, it is allowed to be marketed under a special label that denotes its protected status as an exceptional product (Fig. 1). Being denominated in such a way implies uniqueness and this is where one can draw a direct line to the concept of *terroir*. In this case, the fruit’s special essence—a product of its *terroir*—lies in or is traceable to the combination of soil conditions and the cultivation practices to which it has been exposed within a specific geographic zone. As a result,

² Agro- and gastro-tourism are two other manifestations of this growing trend to treat both food and food production as valuable attractions that local producers and residents can exploit economically.

presumably one can ‘taste’ that land in that fruit or at very least, the difference that its unique conditions have bestowed upon it. The act of tasting though, is not limited geographically and herein lies the key — one need not experience *terroir* or its results *in situ*; for even if one bites into that pear in Barcelona, the Lleida *terroir* will still be evident, much as in the case of the Bordelais soils and oenological strategies that are a part of the sweet Sauternes dessert wine that one may choose to drink to accompany it.



Figure 1: Lleida Pear label denoting it as a product with DOP status.

How should one interpret the dual tension inherent in an essence that is grounded yet nevertheless transferable? Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* offers an intriguing starting point. In the first *a priori* instance, the qualities of specificity and locale anchor *terroir* to its prescribed boundaries. This pervasiveness is a form of *neumena*, the presumed thing-as-itself that constitutes reality, the ‘purity’ of the thing that is supposedly independent of experience — the thing as it is inherently and essentially. While in the first Critique, *neumena* is also ostensibly unknowable, I would suggest that *terroir*'s theoretical portability points to a bridging of the gap between geographic quintessence and

the communication of that fundamental nature or reality.³ Here then, are Kant's *phenomena* or the manifestations that comprise our experience vis-à-vis human cognition. The bridging experience does not occur in terms of actual spatial displacement, though, rather, via taste and sensation. That is, as I allude to above, one does not need to go to the space in question to apprehend a fundamental part of it; taste transcends or manifests like *phenomena* 'transcend' neumenal reality in terms of subjective perception. Thus, the essential characteristics that comprise a thing's *terroir* and as such, the thing-in-itself, pass into experience through sensation. That these sensations and their attendant taste are so subjective that they need to be keyed, maintained or even simply described by experts, convention or by policy points to nothing less than the ideological overlay inherent in *terroir's a posteriori* experience. This is the part of the concept that is exposed to co-option or political manipulation. It is in this crux between the essence of the land and its inherent qualities and the possible political articulation of how things—figuratively—should taste that one sees how Catalan nationalism's relation to the rural is changing both in terms of its internal expression as a recuperative mode and as an external proclamation of stateless nationhood working within the parameters of international conventions regarding food products and artisanal procedures.

So if *terroir* has tendrils that extend not only into the earth but also out towards the marketplace and beyond, into the imaginary of the consumer and, increasingly, into the marketing schemes of advertising companies, what are its particular resonances and the possible critical interpretations that can be made as regards a stateless nation such as Catalonia? I contend that in the absence of the real state apparatuses that permit total distinction (in the sense that 'total' equals recognised sovereignty as a separate political entity), the increased hold on the everyday that a formal connection to *terroir* represents stands as a powerful tool for nation-building in both theoretical and

³ In the book project of which this article will be a part, I will expand further this angle — specifically, by moving beyond the first Critique into the third, that of judgement, and exploring *terroir* as an aesthetic concept as well. I thank William Egginton for his helpful suggestions on this point and for his intriguing proposal that *terroir* may be a category of the imagination.

practical terms. *Terroir* enables and promotes the renewed interest in the land and community that is patent in government initiatives regarding citizenship and the official differentiation of Catalonia as an entity at political, socio-cultural and geographic levels.

The connection between the renewal and codification of a sense of Catalan identity and the specific geography of the area known as Catalonia is well known. Of course, the poetics and aesthetic manifestations of the *Renaixença*'s processes of revival were many and extended from art to journalism and even later to the built environment — as is evident in Antoni Gaudí's use of the organic vernacular in his architectural details. In the present context of food production, though, the aforementioned process of denominating products and procedures—and thus protecting their integrity and by extension, their taste—stands as a latter-day manifestation of the same *ruralisme* that sought previously to engage the Catalan landscape through the personal experience of its space. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this coding occurred through the *Renaixença*-inspired practice of *excursionisme*, which shares important elements of *terroir* in that it connected the citizen with the land and the raw material of the aspiring state. As a visceral and vital experience of space undertaken in a didactic mode yet with a mind to positioning the subject's body in such a way that it could become acquainted with an area that was being identified as national, *excursionisme* solidified that which was willed, keying the cognitive aspects of *phenomena*. The frontier in this case served as both a reminder and a marker of the national real through a physical experience of the particularity of space.

Just as the particularity of geography was the motor of a nineteenth-century movement that persists to this day (the official Centre for *excursionisme* celebrated its one hundred and thirtieth anniversary in 2006), so the particularity of taste (defined as both sensation and predilection) impels a new interpretation of the Catalan countryside in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Foodstuffs, now far removed from the *habitus*⁴ of base domesticity

⁴ In this instance, I employ the term 'habitus' explored by Marcel Mauss and then elaborated by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and*

and folkloric kitsch, have seen their potential to mark and celebrate difference renewed as the formerly recuperative mode of Catalan nationalism adapts to a globalizing market in which supranational bodies such as the EU dictate policy from Brussels, thus bypassing state capitals. I would argue that an analysis of the Catalan government's policies shows that it has realised that specialty products and the traditional ways of creating them hold increasing economic and symbolic power. What is more, in a dual movement that at once elevates select examples of these foods to the global playing field while extending the Generalitat's political capacity to create distinction—a form of sovereignty—it has embarked on a growing campaign to identify products, techniques and areas and to codify them. By reading these political manoeuvres, which are based to varying degrees on the essential properties of *terroir*, one can see how taste gradually transcends space as a key marker without obviating it completely given the aforementioned importance of geography to *terroir*'s own essence.

Denominations

Catalonia's move to 'denominate' its products, territory and practice follows in the footsteps of European countries such as Italy and France.⁵ The scope of qualifications under which these goods may fall is broad and ranges from *Marques de Qualitat* (Marca Q) given for 'differential characteristics,' *Especialitats tradicionals garantides* (ETG),⁶ which may apply to foodstuffs that can claim a 'traditional' composition or the use of long-established materials in their make-up, through to the *Denominació Geogràfica* (DG)⁷ for spirits produced in a certain area that either gives the product its name or is fundamental

Psychogenetic Investigations. That is, as a form of societal habit or taste ingrained through daily practice.

⁵ The French *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* was established in 1919 and originally applied only to wine before branching out to other food products. Italy followed the same path in 1963 ('European 'Designation of Origin' for Wine and Food').

in its character, and the self-explanatory *Denominacions d'origen de vins* ('Distinctius d'origen').⁶

Two categories of distinction stand out as being especially important and wide-reaching in terms not only of the scope of the qualities that they protect but also in the theoretical and practical terms of *terroir* that I have laid out above. The first and most fundamental is the *Denominació d'Origen Protegida* (DOP), which the Generalitat describes on its website as:

la denominació emprada per designar els productes agroalimentaris que procedeixen d'un lloc o una zona geogràfica determinats, o excepcionalment d'un país, que deguin exclusivament o fonamentalment les seves característiques al medi geogràfic, tenint en compte els factors naturals i humans, i que siguin produïts, transformats i elaborats en el lloc o la zona geogràfica que dona nom a la denominació, incloses les denominacions tradicionals de productes agroalimentaris, geogràfiques o no, si compleixen els requisits esmentats al REGLAMENTO (CE) núm 510/2006. ('Denominacions D'origen Protegides')

Note the comprehensiveness in the language, which comes straight from the European Commission: the products must owe their characteristics *exclusively or fundamentally* to the geographic area, all while keeping in mind the human element of production as well. In the DOP's lesser cousin, the *Indicació Geogràfica Protegida* (IGP), though, this exclusivity is not as profound or categorical. As regards the essence of the products that come under the IGP's umbrella, perception alone is enough to qualify a good that 'degui la qualitat especial, la *reputació* o una altra característica concreta al seu origen geogràfic' (emphasis mine) ('Indicacions Geogràfiques Protegides'). At first blush, these different levels and variations of protective categories may seem only to fortify the bureaucratic stereotypes

⁶ Some examples of the foodstuffs that are protected under these various official labels include: chocolates, cookies and honey (Marca Q); *panellets* and ham (ETG); *ratafia catalana* (DG); and wines from eleven 'sectors' including the Priorat, Montsant, Costers del Segre, Penedès and Catalunya (DO).

ascribed to the European Union's treatment of agricultural practices in its member states. As González Blasco points out, though, at their core, the EU's 1992 rulings from which these characteristics are drawn seek to reinforce a general policy of advancing the diversification of food production, as well as the promotion and valuation of specific products, thus providing the consumer with greater information and knowledge about them (González Blasco 1). Seen from this angle, the DOP system codifies geography and practice in a legal sense not only to guarantee privileged status but also to insist on a consciousness-awareness element, with both ostensibly enhancing choice quantitatively—through diversity—and qualitatively, via recognizable markers of pedigree. The aesthetic devices used to mark the DOP product's excellence include the eligible producer's right to use both the approved EU graphic (Fig. 2) as well as a locally designed emblem that sets the item apart from others seemingly similar to it (Figs. 1 and 3). In this way, products contribute visually to a semiotic system that both distinguishes and standardizes so as to further the overall goals of diversification and didacticism. These two objectives dovetail and coincide with Catalonia's expressed desire for more autonomy within the Spanish state and in Europe and are patent in the way that the Catalan government has approached specialty food production in recent years.



Figure 2: DOP symbol



Figure 3: Reus hazelnut DOP label

While a desire to inform the European customer in general may be one of the priorities behind this system, this didactic element takes on added purchase when one considers its role in the dynamics inherent to Catalonia's stateless nationhood that I have alluded to here: the history of its relationship to the land and the way in which *terroir* is gaining ground in that relationship's modern articulation. I would suggest that given these factors and others—such as the revitalisation of the fresh market system in Barcelona and in other cities—that, in the Catalan context, the DOP designations work on Catalans as both consumers and citizens. They appeal to consumers in the basic economic sense of value for money since the denomination is a guarantee of a certain level of production values. On the other hand, the DOPs engage residents as citizens through the process of naming and shared association (*pera de Lleida, avellana de Reus, Oli les Garrigues*) that bridges the land in question to the taste of the product and the visual distinctiveness of the markers that it bears. Thus, through the literal and metaphorical act of consumption, consumers evoke the country(side) and experience tastes that have been coded as local or traditional or as generally pertaining to the specificity of the Catalan experience even if it is not being portrayed or keyed in a holistic way. By protecting the varied taste of its country through the enshrining of specific products as being *essentially* better than others, the Catalan government creates touchstones within its own territory and history — markers of quality that appeal to the consumer's desire for the best and that, importantly, also resonate culturally by recognising and valuing the combination of geography and practice that has gone into the creation of the product in question.

Conclusion

The department of the Generalitat that deals with rural issues and administers the denomination programs has undergone a significant and symbolic name change that reflects the bureaucratic desire I see at play in the way that *terroir*'s core elements have begun to manifest in the new 'packaging' of different parts of the Catalan nation. As the current Minister, Joaquim Llena i Cortina, Member for Lleida, explains in his online message to the citizens of Catalonia:

El Departament, que abans es deia d'Agricultura, Ramaderia i Pesca, es diu ara d'Agricultura, Alimentació i Acció Rural per la nostra voluntat de ser la conselleria del món rural i dels aliments de qualitat, més enllà de tenir el privilegi d'assumir la representació del sector primari. (Llena i Cortina).

The Minister's words give explicit pride of place to the quality foodstuffs that the DOP and other categories take into account. That he even goes so far as to put them on the same footing as the entire 'rural world' illustrates the extent to which active intervention is tied symbolically to a fundamentally new form of valorisation of the rural, the rustic and the traditional. As in previous national dialogues with the land, this appreciation is rooted in space: in the geography of the area that has been identified as being Catalan. This time, however, a new sensation, that of taste, the literal taste of the fruits of the countryside and the labour that helps comprise it has become part of the mix. As a result, the monolithic nature of geography as a marker has been fractured — not from without, as has happened before, but from within, through the enunciation of the regional, of the ultra-local, of the specificity of patches of earth rather than that of vast mountain ranges or plains or river-deltas. Where this packaging will eventually lead is still to be determined. Will a critical mass of awareness bring the cycle full circle and allow for 'Catalonia' to coalesce as an internationally recognised entity, site or brand? Or will the fracturing inherent to specificity defeat this type of recuperation? As I have briefly alluded to here, I believe that the daily practice involved in the articulation of *terroir* and in its 'consumption' or acceptance and use,

will result in a changing relationship between the consumer/citizen and the land. What is certain at this point, though, is that the suggestive concept of *terroir*, which is so apt for a discussion of this growing trend of valorising the local, is subject as well to the type of political coding and influence that the Generalitat has started to employ in earnest.

Bibliography

- ‘Denominacions d’origen protegides’. 2007. 10 July 2007.
<http://www.gencat.net/darp/c/agroalim/dop/cdop00.htm>
- ‘Distintius d’origen i qualitat agroalimentària’. 2007. 10 July 2007.
<http://www.gencat.net/darp/c/agroalim/agrodist/agrodist.htm>
- Elias, Norbert, et al. 2000. *The Civilizing Process : Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Rev. ed. Oxford ; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers
- ‘European ‘Designation of Origin’ for Wine and Food’. 2007. 18 Sept.,
<http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/recipes/hungrymind/designationorigin.html>
- González Blasco, Juan. ‘Denominations of Origin (Dop) and Protected Geographical Indications (Igp) in the European Union: Considerations on the Quality Policies of the Autonomous Regions.’ *Proceedings 40th European Congress of the European Monetary Union and Regional Policy* in Inomics® RePEc Archive. Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration.
<http://www.inomics.com/cgi/repec?handle=RePEc:wiw:wiwrsa:ERSA00p465>
- Highmore, Ben. 2002. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory : An Introduction*. London New York: Routledge.
- ‘Indicacions Geogràfiques Protegides’. 2007. 10 July.
<http://www.gencat.net/darp/c/agroalim/igp/cigp00.htm>
- Jameson, Fredric. 1994. *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. 2003. Rev. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- *Le Guide Hachette Des Vins 2007*. Paris: Hachette Livre, 2006.
- Llena i Cortina, Joaquim. 'Benvinguda Del Conseller'. 2007. 10 July. <http://www.gencat.net/darp/c/departam/salut/csalut01.htm>
- Moran, Joe. 2005. *Reading the Everyday*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Veblen, Thorstein. 2003. 'Pecuniary Canons of Taste'. *The Industrial Design Reader*. Ed. Carma Gorman. New York: Allworth Press, 49-51.