

Between grounding and imagination: Towards a history of the concept of terroir

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Keywords & Abstract

terroir – methodology – history of the soil (symbolic and use) – history of agriculture – history of imagination

Buying food products is, unlike normal shopping, very much directed by a special attention to the geographical origins of the victuals bought rather than to their price. The simple fact that the provenance of food products increasingly can (and due to legislation should) be identifiable by means of their label reveals the underlying **cultural** meaning of these origins.

Nowadays, origin labelled food products are often marketed with the aid of the concept of terroir which presupposes a direct or even organic relation between a specific territory and the organoleptic characteristics of its gastronomic products. With regard to terroir occur at least two striking contradictory tendencies: on the one hand the rather inflationary meaning of terroir, as becomes, for example, visible in the transplantation of this concept onto food cultures that have actually never dealt before with terroir. The French-Norwegian Amilien has described this rather recent phenomenon as “terroirisation”. The concept of terroir is, on the other hand, increasingly prone to critique, since pedological investigations have demonstrated that only cheap wines (so table wines, that are normally not even commercialised let alone marketed as *vins de terroir*) tend to taste of their soil of provenance. Both tendencies show the Janus face of terroir in that it tries to naturalise cultural artefacts whereas supposed nature-based characteristics turn out to be cultural constructs.

It could therefore be worthwhile to explore this nature-culture dialectics of the concept of terroir in a more systematic way, by posing, for instance, the following questions: From what logic rises the impulse to link food products to a specific territory and what are the historical roots of such juxtapositions? Which role and meaning was attributed to the soil? Why has the soil over millennia been a subject of imagination rather than of knowledge? To what extent is the concept of terroir a result of a broader mystification of the soil? And to what extent should insights from geology and especially from pedology substantiate social-cultural studies of food in order to fathom the concept of terroir?

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