

The Storied Soil: Uncovering the Logic and Rhetoric of Terroir

Rory Hill

The subject of my doctoral thesis was the development and sustainability of *terroir*. This is a simultaneously agronomic and cultural concept that was born in France some seven hundred years ago and which has never been more widely recognized, critically debated or highly valued than today. It is a concept that refers to territorial character; that is, to the things that come together in an agricultural territory to give the food and drink produced their unique qualities. It is of unparalleled value in the production and commerce of wine in France, but also sustains a form of argumentation about the farmed environment that has supported regional development and the massive growth in food with designated labels of origin (above all, *Appellations d'Origine* (AOP/IGP), or *Geographische Herkunftsbezeichnungen*) throughout Europe. Our continent plays host to hundreds of products for which recognition turns on facts of human and physical geography, biology, geology, agriculture, and history being arranged into persuasive stories. Terroir is being used more and more as the animating force in the telling of such stories and the promotion of rural economies.

Following my appointment as a Rachel Carson fellow, my intention is to write the book that will transform our understanding of how terroir has developed over time, how it has mobilized ideas about soil, place, and culture in diverse arenas, and how it is today contested in many ways by farmers, consumers, environmentalists and governments. I will argue that terroir offers a uniquely valuable way of understanding lived and perceived human relationships with the farmed environment—one that has evolved in a particular society but which has spread far beyond the borders of France and found synergies with movements in favor of local, slow, and sustainable food around the world, in particular with organic and biodynamic agriculture. I want to write this book in English and focus closely upon the logic and rhetoric of terroir to elucidate how terroir is used to persuade, and how this act of persuasion bespeaks the growing desire in Western society to reconnect to the land and its stories in material, ecological, and imaginative ways.

As natural environments change, so too does terroir: the growth of Marseille's built environment onto former quality vineyards to the east of the city is evidence of that, as is the gradual replacement of wheat fields with pasture in the regions of Savoy and Normandy. But terroir also changes as societies change: the profound modernization of France in the nineteenth century created a host of new connotations for terroir, from rusticity to romance, from defection to perfection. As many consumers in Europe, the USA, and elsewhere in Western economies have sought out locally produced food and drink over concerns about industrial production, so the concept of terroir has been evoked more and frequently in those societies. Finally, as the relationship between environment and society changes, so terroir becomes ever more crucial in its mediation: in the historical basis for labels of geographical protection, in the justification of subsidies for remote rural farming, and in the reasoning behind organic, biodynamic, and slow approaches to agricultural production.

I am always happy to discuss these ideas and would welcome contact from any interested parties as I develop this book project.