

Diaz-Bone, Rainer

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Discourse Conventions in the Construction of Wine Qualities in the Wine Market

By Rainer Diaz-Bone*

University of Lucerne, rainer.diazbone@unilu.ch

1 Introduction

In 1981 Harrison White published his famous article "Where do markets come from"? (White 1981) With this article economic sociology once more claimed the analysis of markets to be a central part of economic sociology and this article was seminal for the American new economic sociology. White identified the core problem of market analysis which is to explain why markets can exist. Because the neoclassical model of perfect competition in markets will erase any profit for producers and soon the producers will be forced to give up their production and the market will collapse. White identified the mechanism producers invented to stabilize the market. They have to implicitly agree on producing in different quality niches, thereby avoiding direct competition and making profit possible and markets stable worlds of production of similar products but with differently perceived qualities (White 1981, 2002a).

Quality in markets is the central feature and in markets qualities must be constructed, perceived and reproduced. This is the quality problem real markets have. But after White's seminal work American new economic sociology did not work out the quality problem as a main problem for market sociology.

This was done in France. There are some important strands in French social science which invented what one could today call the new French economic sociology. One of them is the praxeological sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu has analyzed different markets as economic fields – such as the market for the construction of houses (Bourdieu 2005). The concept of field and the methodology of field analysis can be regarded as a major contribution to market sociology. As White did, Bourdieu demonstrated how markets could be conceived as systems of quality positions, but Bourdieu was also interested in demonstrating how the perception of worth was constructed by investing different forms of capital as well as by discursive

investments. These investments are made by the different producers, other actors in markets and by the field itself.

A seminal article in the field of French market sociology was presented by the anthropologist and economic sociologist Marie-France Garcia-Parpet in 1986 (Garcia-Parpet 1986).¹ She demonstrated how it was possible to build up a strawberry auction market house in a French region. In this region a problem with the quality of the strawberries was recognized by local authorities but the producers were reluctant to change their way of producing and distributing strawberries. An economist was engaged by the regional chamber of agriculture to create a computer-assisted auction market. In fact, he had to campaign for the new auction market and to launch the movement to build the auction house and to train the regional producers as well as the buyers how to behave at strawberry auctions. No element of this perfect market came up spontaneously as neoclassical market theory postulates. Everything had to be realized by the economist's campaign which was backed up by regional politicians. The economist had to campaign also to enhance the quality of strawberries which were produced and an important contribution of his work was to bring in quality classifications so that the strawberry quality was formatted appropriate to the standardized exchange form of the auction market. The study done by Garcia-Parpet became seminal not only because of demonstrating that the analysis of food markets could be paradigmatic for market sociology – as she demonstrated later also for the wine market (Garcia-Parpet 2009) – but also because of demonstrating that market discourses and market dispositives (market devices) are constitutive investments for markets to come into existence and to work as markets.²

Another important movement in French new social sciences is the approach of economics of convention (in short EC) which today is a core part of new French economic sociology. This approach focuses on how economic coordination is organized by actors referring to quality conventions. Quality conventions are cultural logics how to coordinate in economic institutions to collectively produce products. EC assumes a co-existing plurality of such quality conventions as the industrial convention, the market con-

vention, the domestic convention, the green convention and others.³ EC's analyses of markets demonstrate that there is not only one institutional logic for markets – what the economists' notion of markets suggest. All mentioned conventions can be involved in economic coordination, in production and in the construction of economic worth (Boltanski/Thévenot 2006; Storper/Salais 1997). EC places the problem of uncertainty about quality in the center of economic institutional analysis. Also EC includes objects, devices, and cognitive formats in the analysis of how actors in situations coordinate in the production of collectively shared perceptions of product qualities. EC demonstrates how the worth of products is grounded on quality conventions.⁴

For more than a decade now market sociology has discovered the wine market as an ideal object of study and many scholars in the field have published studies on the wine market (examples are White 2000b; Benjamin/Podolny 1999; Garcia-Parpet 2009, 2011; Rössel/Beckert 2012).

Relying on the new French economic sociology, an analysis of the German wine market was done (Diaz-Bone 2005, 2007). In this analysis the field approach provided by Bourdieu and the concept of quality conventions provided by EC were combined to study the discursive logics at work in the German wine market to construct different forms of wine quality.

2 Wine, quality and discourses

But why should economic sociologists regard the wine market as a serious object of scientific study? The quality of wine seems evident, because wine seems to be a simple product in difference to – let's say – modern finance derivatives. Wine seems to have an immediate utility to consumers and seemingly can be immediately appreciated by them.

The opposite is the case. Maybe the most important reason why the wine market is a perfect object for market sociology is the uncertainty of wine experience consumers make when drinking wine. Foundational taste dimensions usually described by adjectives as "sweet", "bitter", "salty", and "sour" are said to be identifiable in a reliable way. Wine entails hundreds of different chemical molecules and hundreds of flavors. It is known from physiological research that human beings are not able to identify a greater number of flavors in a liquid when these are combined (Morrot/Brochet/Dubourdieu 2001). The experience of smell is

instructed by the perceived color of the wine.⁵ Wine tasting is organized by the consumer's knowledge of wine typologies. These known typologies organize the immediate wine experience itself (Brochet/Dubourdieu 2001). Wine experience (when drinking it) is in most cases structured by only few prevailing flavors.

Blind fold tests show that wine experts make mistakes in classifying wines by its taste alone and that even wine makers cannot reliably identify their own wines (Diaz-Bone/Hahn 2007).

The materiality of "the wine in the glass" offers no intersubjective criteria for quality definitions accessible to wine consumers.

Attempts to use chemical criteria – as the must weight at time of grape harvest – and the region of origin to construct quality categories were intended to define quality categories. So it is done in the German wine law. But the main problem is: these criteria do not consider what the wine makers will do with the wine after the grapes were harvested and how wine consumers experience the wine.

In practice, the social context, product knowledge, cultural concepts, practices and objects have to supplement the wine experience and quality definition, but in fact they co-organize the wine perception and so the experience of wine quality.

The perceived quality of wine is socially constructed in the processes of wine production, marketing and distribution and the situations of wine consumption. It is argued here that the wine market itself is the main field in which this organization of perceived quality is generated and differently perceived wine qualities are produced.

In wine markets actors have to invest in the social construction of perceived wine quality and quality classifications to deal with other factors which make wine markets very dynamic social structures.

These factors question existing quality constructions or mobilize new ones.

(1) In the last decades the national wine markets in many European countries have experienced a growing internationalization of the offered wine assortment. New wines from almost all continents of the world from countries as South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, from regions as

South and North America are offered today also in European markets. The original national strategies, how to evaluate and classify wines, have to deal with the new wines from other countries.

(2) The wine market suffers from overproduction and a big share of this overproduction nonetheless is of high industrial standard. Overproduction forces in particular producers of mass wines in traditional wine producing countries as France, Italy, Germany or Spain to redefine their quality definitions.

(3) Oenological scientists and the industrial researchers in wine technology have made progresses in developing strategies to approximate cheaply produced industrial wines in taste to more expensive wines. A huge set of industrial techniques exist, to enhance the quality of industrially produced wines toward the quality of high-classified wines of traditional wineries.

(4) Cultural trends as the move towards more "dry" wines, towards more alcoholic wines or towards ecologically produced wines correspond to changes in life styles and to mechanisms of distinction between life styles.⁶ Criteria for quality definition hence change.

(5) Because experienced wine quality is not determined by its physico-chemical substance, a plurality of evaluation regimes is possible. An international trend is the establishment of numerical rating systems as the system of the Gault Millau Wine Guide or the "Parker points", introduced by the worldwide influential wine critique Robert Parker.⁷ This trend advances the plurality of evaluation systems and questions established ones.

In order to stabilize markets, to invent quality differences and to construct wine quality, economic discourses and economic dispositives as social forms of investment are permanently necessary.

Wine producers use the wine bottle itself, its design and the text on the wine bottle labels as dispositives to signal wine quality and sometimes also to give "instructions for use" ("mode d'emploi"), for example, at which temperatures and to which food the wine is consumed at best. The stylized graphics of the wineries are designed to signal tradition, regionality, and sometimes also esthetical modernity. Wine bottle labels also have the information on it, prescribed by law as protected certificates of regional origin, (AOC in France), the alcohol level or legal wine

quality categories. These information can be regarded as what Gérard Genette has called "paratexts" (Genette 1997). Genette applied this concept to books. The cover text is an example for such a paratext: its function is to frame and to explain the content but also the quality of the content of the book to possible buyers. Wine bottles' labels sometimes also offer short texts as paratexts to the wine, which describe the taste of the wine and refer to wine world concepts as region, terroir or wineries' expertise and craftsmanship.

In supermarkets and in specialized wine stores the shelves, wherein the wine is presented, are also dispositives representing the market order. In the first place, shelves are organized applying the difference of white wine and red wine as well as the regional and national origin of wines. Quality is signaled by the height of the shelves. Cheap wines are presented in the lower shelves, more expensive wines are presented in the higher shelves.

In specialized wine stores the wine salesman offers sales guidance and quality explanation thereby introducing wine consumers into the wine quality discourses. He can be conceived as an intermediary in the wine market, participating in the mediating and co-construction of the wine quality at the point of sale.⁸

Consumer markets nowadays have their own specialized media as shopping guides, special interest journals, specialized TV programs, internet-websites and others. Here the discourse position of wine experts is implemented. Wine critics as Robert Parker, Hugh Johnson, Michael Broadbent, Jancis Robinson, Stuart Pigott and others who take part in the discursive practices in the wine field are writing books and journal articles and are offering wine expertise for wine auctions. But also prestigious wine makers, wine journalists, oenologists, scientists in disciplines of food production, agro-culture and agro-business, as well as wine traders have their positions in the wine field and also do participate in the professional discursive construction of wine qualities.

Because of the plurality of actors and of economic dispositives in the wine market, this field is also a field of discursive battle for implementing quality definitions and criteria for it, questioning others.

3 Discursive quality conventions in the field of wine production

The discursive practices contributing to the construction of the perception of worth and quality must be conceived as collective and organized practices. Here the concept of field is enhanced by introducing the notion of discursive practices elaborated by Michel Foucault.⁹ Single discursive elements are concepts like the “character of wine” or the “structure of wine”. But in fact these words are senseless if they are not analyzed in the discursive context wherein they are embedded in a specific discursive practice and wherein they get a specific meaning. The important notions of “terroir” or of “region” in the wine world are objects of intense discursive work to organize its semantics and its relation to other discursive elements. From a Foucaultian perspective, therefore, discourses do not reflect a pre-given reality. Instead, they bring in new conceptual meanings and ways of thinking, arguing, justifying and also new possibilities for discursive strategies. Such discursive practices have an internal coherence which can be regarded as the inner cultural logic of these discursive practices. Foucault identified in his historical analysis of scientific disciplines such inner coherence logics which he called “episteme”. But he thought of these logics as unifying deeper structures for the disciplines in a whole historical epoch (Foucault 1994). The concept of convention – as EC has developed it – is more suitable to model the inner logic of economic discourses in markets for several reasons.

Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) identified a set of conventions as cultural logics which have been identified in many economic analyses and which have proved as a valid and flexible typology of cultural logics for economic coordination. EC assumes a co-existing plurality of such conventions allowing for compromises and conflicts between conventions. Here, the realization of conventions in collective discursive practice is focused, although for EC conventions are always related to objects and cognitive formats and cannot be reduced to discursive practices. Therefore, conventions as logics of economic discourse are labeled “discourse conventions” (DCs).

The different discourses in the wine field have to construct the perceived ontology of wine, of the order of the wine world and have to bring in normative orders applicable to wine. Wine discourses have to construct the common knowledge, how to produce wine the right way, how to consume it adequately and why wine is part of one’s life style, because wine “promises” to be an expression of one’s

life style. It is this discursive work that reduces the uncertainty about wine quality and grounds trust in quality.

This perspective was used to analyze the quality discourses in the German wine field. It was done as combined ethnographical field analysis and qualitative discourse analysis of media, produced in the wine field such as wine journals for consumers, journals for the wine market enterprises, wine guides, self-presentations of wine producers and others.¹⁰ The analysis recovered a set of discourse conventions relevant for the German wine market and the specific form these discourse conventions realized in wine quality discourses.

(1) The industrial discourse convention organizes for a huge part of the wine field its view on how to produce wine and how to ground wine quality. The industrial discourse convention proclaims the application of oenological research, large scale industrial wine fabrication and the long term planning of wine tastes, wine production and wine distribution. The discourse notions of “scientifically educated wine knowledge and research”, “scientific control of ingredients and fermentation”, “scientific and engineer’s expertise”, “technical innovation”, “standardization” and “consumer-taste-orientation”, are the back bones for the discursive construction of wine whose quality should be reliable, not complex, easy drinkable, although, in taste corresponding to the typical smell of grape sorts. Legitimate criteria of success are the volumes of wine bottles sold, the efficiency of industrial planning in the long run, the stability of wine quality produced as well as the market share for the grape-based wine sector.

(2) The domestic discourse convention represents the main opposite discursive order in the wine field. The notions of “wine production as a craftsmanship”, “the winery as a family based atelier”, “family tradition of the winery”, of expertise as “personal and inherited mastership” are important discourse elements. The wines produced are said to represent the properties of the “terroir” the winery owns. “Terroir” is not only a notion to grasp the micro-climate conditions of vineyards and the composition of the soil, but it is the result of a “cultivation” and intense “labor to ameliorate the vineyard”. In fact, the notion of “terroir” covers also the prestige of a vineyard, in Germany the prestigious vineyards have names, printed on the vine bottle labels. In this wine discourse “terroir” becomes a magical word for the vineyards’ potential. The specific “climatic features” in different years as conditions of raising the grapes, the “personal expertise” of the persons

engaged in the winery, its “traditional style of wine making” are concepts which are deployed for explanations for the taste and therefore quality of resulting wine. Therefore, wines should be individual in “character” and criteria of success are high classification results and high prices per bottle. This notion of domestic quality is widely distributed in the media of the wine world. The representatives of this discourse convention are very “chatty” in terms of discursive activity. Paradoxically, most wine consumers recognize the existence of this discourse convention but normally consume wines which are industrially produced.

(3) In Germany another discourse convention is established. In the south-western regions of Germany the regional populations have their own wine taste culture, which appreciate wine produced by small wine producers and often made out of regional grape sorts, like the grape sort Trollinger cultivated in Baden-Württemberg, the grape sort Elbling cultivated in the Mosel region. One could name this discourse convention regionalistic. Here, wine is appreciated because it is part of the traditional everyday culture. The notion of “familiarity” is important here. Consumers often know the wine producer for a longer time because they are located in the neighbourhood and part of local networks. These wines are regarded as part of the regional cultural popular heritage. The notion of “tradition” is also important but it has to be distinguished by the way the same word is used under the domestic discourse convention. Tradition is not linked to noblesse or family tradition of wineries, it is linked to the regional and formerly more rural life styles. In fact, the discourse in this part of the wine world is not elaborated as much as the one organized by the domestic convention, it comes to the fore when its quality is to be explained to people outside the region and when its quality is questioned.

(4) Of growing importance in many markets is the ecological or green convention (Thévenot/Moody/Lafaye 2000). In the wine market, the quality based on the green convention claims in first instance for the specific way of production not for the resulting taste. Notions of “respect for and integrity of nature”, “cycles of natural reproduction”, “self-regulatory power of nature and its soil” are deployed to convince wine traders and consumers of a principally different quality discourse which privileges a way of organizing the wine production which is here the explanation for superior quality. Similar to the regionalistic convention, ecological discourse refers to its embeddedness in regional economies.

(5) The market discourse convention – as the market convention is identified by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) – is of inferior importance in the wine field. Wine farmers who raise grapes and produce wines as preproduct for the large cellar industry refer to it. The media for wine farmers publish the market prices for this product called “bulk wine” (Fasswein) in regular terms.

4 The conventional structure of the German field of wine producers

In orientation to the Bourdieusian strategy of field construction it was aimed to relate the identified discourse conventions to the positions within the German wine field.

This way, the following graph relates the discursive infrastructure, which is the system of established discourse conventions (DCs) within the wine field, to the system of its organizational forms, which is built up of the possible entrepreneurial forms, wine producers can choose.

The horizontal dimension of the so constructed wine field is mainly determined by the opposition between the craftsman pole and the industrial pole. The horizontal dimension corresponds to different structures of capital organizations.

The vertical dimension is mainly determined by the volume of the different forms of capital wine producer have at their disposal and which are appreciated as resources in this field.

See appendix, figure 1: Discourse conventions (DCs) in the German wine field

Rainer Diaz-Bone is Professor of Sociology at the University of Lucerne. He published *Kulturwelt, Diskurs und Lebensstil* (2010, 2nd edition), he edited *Märkte als soziale Strukturen* (2007, together with Jens Beckert and Heiner Ganßmann), *Diskurs und Ökonomie* (2009 together with Gertraude Krell), *Conventions and institutions from a historical perspective* (2011, special issue of *Historical Social Research*, together with Robert Salais) and *Soziologie der Konventionen* (2011).

Endnotes

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1This article has been translated into English (Garcia-Parpet 2006) and it will be translated into German (Garcia-Parpet forthcoming).

2The seminal paper of Garcia-Parpet (1986) is the first economic contribution to demonstrate the later so called "performativity" (Callon 1998) of economics: economics perform the economy applying their economic theory as blue print for economic institutions.

3See for the green convention Thévenot/Lafaye/Moody (2000).

4The actor-network-theory (ANT), which was developed in close contact to EC, also regards these processes of quality constructions in markets including materials and objects into the analysis (Callon/Mehadel/Rabehiosa 2002).

5In a physiological experiment 54 students recruited from an oenological program at the University of Bordeaux, had to taste a red wine and a white wine in a first session. Then these students had to describe these wines. Out of the wine descriptions the two wine descriptive languages for red wine and for white wine were extracted. In a second session students again had to taste two wines. This time a red wine, but the second wine was an artificially red colored white wine (using smell-free food color). Again students were asked to describe these wines. This time for both wines the descriptive language for red wine was applied by the students. The authors conclude that because of the visual perception the students discounted the olfactory information (Morrot/Brochet/Dubourdieu 2001).

6See for the concept of social distinction Bourdieu (1984).

7Robert Parker is a worldwide known wine critique, his journal "Wine Advocate" and his wine recommendations (based on his rating system) are influencing the international wine tastes as well as pricing politics of wineries (Langewiesche 2000; Diaz-Bone 2005). See also the documentary film about the wine world *Mondovino* (made by the director Jonathan Nossiter in 2006).

8See for the concept of market intermediaries Bessy/Eymard-Duvernay 1997; Bessy/Chauvin (forthcoming).

9See for the critique of Bourdieu's notion of discourse and the integration of the Foucaultian discourse theory into field analysis Diaz-Bone (2010).

10The first part of the empirical field work was done between 2004 and 2007 (Diaz-Bone 2005, 2007). It was later continued.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Discourse Conventions (DCs) in the German Wine Field

