SESSION 3 : DAIRY LAND, SUSTAINABLE LAND?

Presided by Bernard Faye

Heritage, Identity, and the Construction of Quality among Cheese Producers in the United States and France

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In the United States, everyone knows that "great milk comes from Happy Cows and Happy Cows come from California." The Happy Cows campaign, which began in 2000, was the brainchild of the California Milk Marketing Board. Depicting cows grazing on clean, green grass under clear blue skies, these ads capitalize on the desire of consumers to connect to their food system. The ads recall a simpler time – when milk was "real" and perhaps came in glass jars, when there was a milkman. These cows had names (like Bessie or Bonnet) – and were milked by farmers. Playing on American nostalgia for our "dairy heritage," the Happy Cows campaign was remarkably successful. However, the reality of California dairy is less idyllic – cows packed into dryland fields, a harsh life from calf to feedlot with perhaps 4-5 years of hormone-induced milk production in-between. There is no green grass, and conditions are far from happy for both cows and workers.

The reason why the California Milk Marketing board has found such success is that people are yearning to reconnect with their food system – to find an alternative to the opaque and confusing relations that characterize the global agro-industrial food complex. This system is characterized by "distance and durability" (Friedmann 1994) and values efficiency, industrialization, volume, and speed of production. In response to problems associated with the industrial food system, a variety of alternative food initiatives have found success in the United States. Farmers markets, community supported agriculture, fair trade, and organic agriculture all aim to "re-embed" values like environmental sustainability, social justice, and locality into the food production system. But one characteristic is often – curiously – left out of visions for a more sustainable agriculture in the U.S.: heritage.

In France and in other parts of Europe, the heritage and territorial identity of foods are central components of rural development policy and the marketing and promotion of specific products. What are the opportunities and vulnerabilities for heritage production in the United States? In this paper, we explore this question by focusing on dairy production, comparing an exemplary case of heritage production – Comté cheese, France's highest-volume AOC cheese and one characterized by a commitment to shared traditions and artisanal practices – to the emerging market for high-end cheese production in the state of Wisconsin. Drawing on the lessons from the Comté case, we explore ways in which a heritage-based model might offer options for historically dairy-based regions in the United States.

France is recognized for its long history of protecting local foods and agricultural heritage, and for the strength and sophistication of the political institutions that the French state has developed to protect the links between tradition, place, and food quality. In recent years, there has been a surge of consumer interest in protecting and valuing the artifacts, monuments, landscapes, and traditional foods that constitute France's shared past. The most significant way in which the French commitment to tradition has been codified is through the appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC) system. AOCs are fundamentally linked to the notion of terroir, the idea that "the special quality of an agricultural product is determined by the character of the place from which it comes" (Gade 2004, p. 849). The AOC designation not only ties production to a particular place, it also codifies the methods of production, ensuring the maintenance of the traditional practices that have historically defined the product.

The case of Comté cheese, a cooked and pressed cheese produced in western France and protected as an AOC since 1958, demonstrates how the unique heritage of regions and products can be used as a source of power for local actors. The codes of practices for Comté cheese set very strict, specific parameters regarding production of milk and cheese. These specifications require a minimum amount of pasture land per cow and prohibit the use of silage. All milk used for the production of Comté cheese must come from the Montbéliarde breed, a local breed. Cheese must be produced in copper vats and aged on pine shelves, practices that have been passed down from generation to generation.

The Comté producers protect the heritage of their cheese because they see this as an important part of its quality, but the emphasis on the preservation of traditional production methods within the Comté supply chain is also strategic. First, it has been used to differentiate Comté cheese from other French cheeses. Especially in the last fifteen years, the CIGC has promoted and capitalized on Comté's association with a bucolic rural countryside, small farmers and their brown and white cows, and artisanal production methods. Second, the emphasis on tradition and heritage is also an explicit strategy to reduce concentration within the supply chain and prevent transnational dairy companies from taking over, because the production specifications make achieving economies of scale much more difficult. So it has been strategically useful for the farmers.

We suggest that a more heritage-based strategy might also work in Wisconsin, which is still known as "America's dairyland," even though California recently surpassed Wisconsin in terms of milk production and is poised to surpass it soon in terms of cheese production. We argue that a heritage-based model could provide Wisconsin with a route to rural development that emphasizes quality and heritage over volume of production. In this paper, we discuss three aspects of heritage that are important: heritage of production, heritage of consumption, and natural (resource-based) heritage. First, Wisconsin should emphasize its long history of cheese and dairy production. Second, Wisconsin has opportunities to develop its consumer heritage. Finally, Wisconsin needs to emphasize its natural heritage. The rolling hills and soils of southern Wisconsin are well-suited to production of prairie grasses and forbs and diverse grass-based dairy. Emphasizing and marketing Wisconsin's "terroir" could be an effective marketing strategy, and could also help to preserve the natural landscapes of Wisconsin.

In conclusion, Wisconsin stands to gain by learning from European models of heritage production. They provide Wisconsin with a route to rural development that emphasizes quality and heritage over volume of production. This is what economic sociologist Joel Rogers calls taking the "high road" rather than the low road to economic growth. It might not as fast. It might not be quite as profitable, at least in the short term. But this type of economic development is more sustainable. It builds more sustainable growth. It keeps more people milking, and more families living in the countryside. And in addition, emphasizing heritage might actually keep those cows truly happy—something that should not get lost in this process!

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Sociologist at North Carolina State University. Her research focuses primarily on the relationships between local actors, global institutional and market dynamics. Her PhD dissertation compared the production systems of Comté in France and tequila in Mexico to theorize the way that organizational and territorial factors interact in the construction of more sustainable and equitable geographic indication systems. She has published articles in *Rural Sociology, the Journal of Rural Studies*, and *Agriculture and Human Values, among others*.