

Wine, Work, and Wealth: Class Relations and Modernization in the Champagne Wine Industry, 1870-1914

Kolleen M. Guy¹

*Department of History
University of Texas at San Antonio*

In languages far removed from French, people who have never seen – let alone tasted – the wines of Champagne use the word as an image. Untold numbers of writers, painters, and musicians, from eighteenth-century *philosophes* to twentieth-century jazz singers, have contributed to the ongoing “invention” of the image by using the wine to denote status and, more significantly, the glories of the French nation. The legitimacy of champagne as a popular symbol has resulted from a specific history that involved the periodic modification of old symbolic meanings and the appearance of champagne in new symbolic forms and as part of new rituals. Indeed, there was a continuing process of creating both a mythic present and past for “champagne.” The ascendancy of *le champagne* – the wine – to its embodiment of France follows from a general process of “invention” as well as a specific political history of the province or region (*la Champagne*), economic history of the vineyard within the province (*Champagne viticole*), and social history of the people of the region (*les champenois*). It is the compendium of these “histories” that forms the core of my study, *Wine, Work, and Wealth*.

My dissertation explores the period roughly between the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War and the beginning of World War I. During this time champagne became an object of mass culture, a centerpiece of bourgeois society both in France and abroad. Historians have noted that this was an era of rapid transformation when social groups and their milieu underwent dramatic change, resulting in a search for new ways to mark social status and to structure social relations [Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992, p. 5]. Champagne became a part of this repertoire of symbolic devices used to delineate social boundaries, supplying a common denominator for those claiming membership to certain social groups. The power of this symbol was reflected in champagne

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sales figures, which leaped from 15 million bottles per year in 1868 to almost 39 million bottles per year by 1909.

The increased popularity of champagne and the striking rise in consumption served to increase champagne's symbolic capital, resulting in enormous dividends to the community of producers who created the commodity. Production of regional sparkling wines united peasants (grape growers, small proprietors, cultivators, or salaried workers and their families) and non-peasants (large landowners, notables, and merchant-manufacturers) who had a collective interest in champagne as a consumer product. No single group, agency, or institution had the power to create and consolidate the image of champagne, but the merchant-manufacturers (*négociants*) who controlled the manufacturing and marketing of the sparkling wine and the peasant winegrowers (*vignerons*) who produced the grapes that formed the base of the regional wines were in a unique position to profit from cultural attitudes toward its consumption.

These two groups were prominent in the struggle to control "champagne" as both a consumer product and a community at the turn of the century, creating and responding to images, symbols, rituals, and myths about the wine, the land, and the nation. Both groups were aware that champagne and its associations were complex and sometimes paradoxical. The symbolic association of the wine with elegance and gaiety was often in stark contrast to the harsh realities of producing the world-renowned sparkling wine. The connection of champagne with timeless tradition and old-world quality was seemingly inconsistent with the recent introduction of sparkling wine to the international wine market and the modern technology, production, and commercial organization of the industry. The affiliation of champagne with fraternity and harmonious celebration diverged from the sometimes contentious relations within the champagne industry. Yet the *vignerons* and the *négociants* who earned their livelihood from the appellation of champagne had the greatest interest in maintaining these images, symbols, and myths regardless of the paradoxes.

This study begins by examining the important power differentials between *vignerons* and *négociants*. New "traditions" in both vine cultivation and wine production developed almost imperceptibly from altered social relations between the groups and evolving market practices for the wine industry after mid-century. The first two chapters on the *vignerons* and *négociants* demonstrates that while these new traditions resulted in important power differentials between winegrower and merchants, in Champagne, unlike southern wine regions, this did not mean that a few elite growers and merchants controlled the invention of these traditions. Indeed, groups within the wine-growing community contributed to an ongoing negotiation about what constituted "champagne" – the wine and the region.

By the 1880s with the onset of phylloxera (a vine blight that ravaged the French vineyards), we see the first in a series of clashes over control of vineyard traditions. Chapter 3 chronicles the conflict between *vignerons* and *négociants* over the creation, composition, and control of the *Association syndicale autorisée pour la défense des vignes contre le phylloxera*, a government-supported

organization for treatment of the phylloxera. Although both sides used historical arguments to legitimate their traditions, those arguments were “invented” for a restructured marketplace and were, at base, concerned with control over resources – including the economic and cultural legacy of “champagne.”

Historians have argued that the conflict over the Association syndicale was the result of peasant ignorance or fierce individualism [Lheureux, 1905; Ordish, 1972]. As the analysis of the phylloxera crisis demonstrates, however, this was more than a parochial debate over vine treatment methods and syndicate organization between a backward rural population and modern “mediators” who were trying to bring the forces of a dynamic, urban-based world to an isolated peasant collectivity. Events in Marne reveal that the French peasantry was actively contending for its interests in the face of capitalist inroads and a centralizing state. The struggles of the phylloxera era were part of an active rather than reactive attempt by both *vignerons* and *négociants* to renegotiate the “community” centered on champagne in the wake of larger social and economic changes in rural France. Conflict resulted from the inevitable frictions of interest groups within the Champagne community differing over the definition and boundaries of that community, membership in the collectivity, and control of the economic and cultural legacy of “champagne.” It was, above all, this process of negotiating community that was embodied in the contention and compromise surrounding the treatment of phylloxera.

The phylloxera crisis and the years of upheaval focused attention on the legitimacy of *négociants* and other non-peasant groups to delineate the rural community and control the economic and cultural legacy of champagne. Before the phylloxera crisis, the power of the *négociants* and the *Syndicat du Commerce* to “speak” for the industry had never been challenged. As the manufacturers and marketers of champagne, they viewed themselves as the center of the champagne community, the arbiters and protectors of “champagne.” *Vignerons’* willingness to join in collective action in the 1880s and 1890s, as the next two chapters demonstrate, was a sign of an active peasantry willing to assert its collective vision of champagne and define its place within the community. Peasant activists focused attention on the legitimacy of *négociant* claims to control the economic and cultural legacy of champagne. Discord in the 1890s helped to define a *vigneron* position on the boundaries and membership of the champagne community.

By the turn of the century, phylloxera ceased to be the central issue in the vineyards. Fraudulent wine production, however, emerged from a rather peripheral concern in the 1890s to become the primary focus of attention for both the ordinary and fine wine industries. The government had enormous power to legislate reform of wine production since change was demanded by those both inside and outside of the wine industry. From London to Los Angeles, there was growing suspicion that the consumer was being enticed by the popularity and prestige of the name “champagne” into buying, at inflated prices, ordinary wines. With the reputation of champagne linked to its quality – the “purity” of the beverage – *vignerons* and *négociants* in the Champagne region

were increasingly alarmed by reports that champagne *négociants*, without distinction, were using the regional denomination for wines produced with grapes from outside the region. The basis of the concerns of these two groups was very different, but the end result was the same: each desired intervention by the French government to protect champagne.

Protecting champagne, however, meant different things to different groups within the industry and, subsequently, proposals for dealing with the problem varied. Champagne – the wine and the region – was a social and cultural construct. *Négociants*, *vignerons*, and representatives from Marne appeared, at first, united in their attempts to define champagne and control the boundaries of the area of production through delimitations. Despite earlier differences, those involved in champagne production within the confines of Marne managed to come together in 1908 in the face of challenges to what they viewed as the traditional boundaries of “Champagne.” With the ruling by the government in Paris on December 17, 1908, issuing to Champagne the first legally recognized regional delimitation, there was national recognition of the rural communities’ construction of their own identity based on a unique vision of rural society within the French state.

As the succeeding narrative indicates, however, this did not end the contentious negotiations over the construction of community or the place of that community within the French nation. Challenges to enforcement of administrative delimitations focused attention on the fissures both within Champagne and within the French nation. Muted in the public statements of harmony issued by the *vignerons*’ representatives and *négociants*’ representatives was the shrill voice of a community in transition. The fragile entente created by delimitation battles in the early part of the century could not withstand the exposing of deeply rooted differences between *négociants* and *vignerons*, part of a long battle to define their roles within the regional economy and the community. The period between 1900 and 1910 offers a glimpse at a dynamic rural society and a state whose survival rested on rural support struggling to define the boundaries of the champagne community and the position of that community within the French nation.

This study concludes by arguing that “champagne,” like the French nation itself, was envisioned as limited because finite borders were social constructions; beyond these imagined borders existed other regional and economic identifications. But determining the boundaries of membership in *la Champagne*, like determining those of *la France*, was not as simple as drawing up territorial divisions on a map. Identity – being included as one of *les champenois* like one of *les français* – could be highly contested by those claiming membership. *Wine, Work and Wealth* demonstrates that the strife and occasional violent confrontations in Champagne between 1870 and 1914 were part of this process of determining membership, as groups within the industry clashed over the way that the community was defined and, thus, who had control (as both arbiter and protector) of the economic and cultural legacy of “champagne.”

Questions of membership and community often arise in national histories [Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1990]. For generations of historians,

rural society was determined to have eternal qualities linked to the land and its people. The task of the French nation in the late nineteenth century was to integrate the separate *pays* that made up the rural world into the nation in a process “akin to colonization” [Weber, 1976, p. 486]. The process of constructing the nation thus involved an assimilation of the backward countryside into the more homogeneous, urban-based world. Paris and urban-based forces were the motor behind the fundamental changes that steadily altered traditional rural society in provincial France. Historians conclude that the rural population was reactive rather than active in shaping modern France.

By assuming that a rural-urban dichotomy existed in late nineteenth-century France, all development – economic, cultural, political, or social – is perceived as a function of urban-based agencies for change. The ability of agrarian regions, with diverse organizational forms, to adapt to the threats and opportunities of the world-market economy are minimized. Emphasis is placed on cultural intermediaries who introduced and negotiated urban ideas and organizations against rural mentalities and interests. Rural entrepreneurs, such as the Champagne *négociants*, are designated as either outsiders forcing change on reluctant peasant communities or mediators between urban markets and a backward peasant collectivity.

Historians have based such conclusions on studies that focused on radical anomalies (peasant communities with long revolutionary traditions) or on the “problem peasantries” (peasant communities that remained largely aloof from the large structural changes taking place in rural France). By looking at areas of provincial France like Champagne, where there were more innovative and responsive approaches to new opportunities and challenges offered by the growing world-market economy of the late nineteenth century, it becomes clear that, far from being passive recipients of urban-based change, the rural community was an active participant in negotiating its place within the nation and in the global marketplace.

Studies of French industrialization suggest that conclusions about a backward rural France rely on old assumptions regarding French economic development. In particular, these conclusions appear based on models of French industrial development where peasant agriculture and small-scale production were both a symptom and a source of France’s steady but slow economic growth [Clough, 1946; Roehl, 1976] and French society, mentalities, and institutions served as “retarditive factors” [Landes, 1949, 1951, 1963; Heywood, 1981]. In this view, a changeless countryside contributed to French “backwardness.” Revisionists of this conception of economic development argue that the pattern of French industrialization with its emphasis on small-scale production of luxury handicrafts and fine foods was a healthy adaptation to the competitive market of the nineteenth century. Rather than “retarditive factors” in French economic growth, family firms and small-scale farms were the strength of French industrialization [O’Brien and Keyder, 1978]. New approaches to the French economy require a fresh look at the ways in which rural industries contributed to the evolution of capitalist production.

A reassessment of the dynamics of rural society, which have been obscured by the previous focus on urban-based transformative forces, are long overdue. Rural history, despite the inroads into other areas of French history by feminist theory and the analytical tools of poststructuralism, has remained wedded to the elaboration of conceptual dualisms – urban/rural, capitalism/patriarchy, men's work/women's work. The conservative peasants are contrasted with radical industrial workers; the peace of the countryside is compared to the revolutionary cities; the industrial modernization of urban France is measured against the relatively slow pace of change in agricultural regions.

In all of the clashes and confrontations within Champagne, the imagining of community was central to determining the response to and outcome of conflict. The champagne industry offers a unique vantage point for examining the process of cultural contact in which rural communities and the French nation negotiate their identities in relation to each other. The champagne wine industry shows that peasants and rural entrepreneurs were actively linked to the twin forces of state-building and capitalism. The rural community of Champagne did not lose its identity and become "French." In contending for its interests, the community actively participated not only in the construction of modern France but also in the ongoing process of negotiating a "French" identity.

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