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Terroir with legs Challenging Geographical Indications for meat products

François Casabianca and Erik Thévenod-Mottet[1]

***Abstract* – In Europe, meat products have been only recently considered for registration as Geographical Indications, long after other products such as wines and cheeses. Due to the mobile nature of animals, defining and assessing the link between animal products and their geographical origin appeared to be challenging for the concepts and experience previously developed. If pastures and places of processing units have been considered as relevant for milk secretion and cheese production, the link between meat and place of production seems to present less consistency. Moreover, the difference between raw meat and processed meat products, being considered either as two clearly distinct categories or as the two ends of a continuum, adds much complexity. Finally, the great variety in GIs for meat products shows a broad range of potential and effects for rural development, with different stakes for breeders and processors or other agents of the supply-chains. Such range appears often related to the various capacities of local actors for taking initiatives towards origin qualification.**

Geographical Indications for meat products?

The WTO TRIPS Agreement of 1995 provides a broad definition for Geographical Indications (GIs) as an intellectual property tool, which is now considered as the world reference due to the number of WTO members and their related legal obligations. But, prior to the WTO, some national legislations and the Lisbon Agreement defined the Appellation of Origin (AO), requiring a strong link between the quality of the product and its geographical origin through human and natural factors. In 1992, a system was established in the European Union for the registration and protection of two categories of denominations: Protected Designations of Origin (PDOS, similar to AO) and Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs). This late category, similar to the WTO GI, is less requiring as to the link to the terroir. The stress is put on the reputation rather than on human and natural factors, and contrary to PDO, all the steps of the production and processing of the product must not necessarily take place in the delimitated geographical area.

Now that more than 1'400 PDOs and PGIs (without wines and spirits) are already registered at the EU level while the recognition and protection of GIs is spreading throughout the world, new stakes arise regarding the definitions, the assessment of the applications and the socio-economic effects of GIs. Meat products are both representative and specific enough to build an analysis on these questions. Hence, there are more than 150 denominations registered or in the process of being registered as PDOs or PGIs at the EU level for fresh meat, and more than 160 for processed meat products.

Meat as raw material

We base our analysis mainly on the French and Swiss experiences and cases, with some examples from other countries (Italy, Brazil). We first provide a general view on the situation of the meat-based products considered as origin products. The core matter of our paper is to question the recent (end of the 1990's) integration of meat products within the PDO-PGI French and Swiss frameworks. This allows setting a typology of various ways for linking meats and meat products to origin, crossing both the characteristics of the products and the criteria for their registration as GIs.

Meat products: roots and routes

Since the 1950s, the production of meat in Europe was increasingly characterised in a way which is not compatible with the qualification of origin-based products: concentration, vertical integration, industrialization, standardization, spreading of a limited number of breeds, use of meat as an ingredient, importation of animal feed, etc. The consumers' knowledge on fresh meat faded while standardization of the quality progressed. However, regionally specific processed meat products remained numerous, thanks to organoleptical characteristics easy to differentiate: particular shapes, ingredients (bread, cabbage, etc.) for sausages, process of drying or smoking, or spices. As a matter of fact, the trade in fresh meat developed later than the one in processed meat products, for obvious technical reasons, and so origin-based reputation is mainly attached to processed products.

Then we can distinguish between two categories of products: first, a few cases of fresh meats benefiting from a quite recent and regional reputation linked to their geographical origin; and second, lots of processed products benefiting from an ancient, and sometimes international, reputation based on know-how rather than on the geographical origin of the raw meat. Not surprisingly, the first category includes PDOs, whereas the PGI scheme suits the products of the second category. But some products are not easy to rank. Hence, numerous PGIs for

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fresh poultry have been registered. As an example, not less than 36 French PGIs for poultry were registered in 1996 at the European level through the simplified procedure, for products that were initially defined as corresponding to a superior quality standard rather than on a link to *terroir*. Even PDO can be applied for processed meat products.

Challenging the requirements for PDOs

The development of PDOs is historically focused first on wines and later on cheeses. Apart from some exceptions (e. g. poulet de Bresse in 1957, Parma ham in 1970), meat products were quite recently taken into account as potential PDO products.

The influence of the climate, soils and feed on a meat product, being raw or processed, is much more difficult to demonstrate than it is the case for vegetal products. The main challenge concerns the capacity of the local actors to show how the livestock system is giving different results than in other locations with the same genotype. The interaction genotype by environment including the practices and the technical culture of local breeders is core in such demonstration. In the case of cheeses, this evidence is quite easy to provide as milk is a continuous secretion. For the meat, the characteristics are obtained at slaughter and the composition of muscular and fat tissues are the reflect of the whole-life of the animal.

Most of the registered European PDO for processed meat products benefit from a derogation as to the geographical source of the raw meat. The new EU Regulation 1171 of 2012 even provides possibilities of derogation as well as restrictions that are specific to meat products, no similar provisions existing for other kinds of products. In particular, the location of slaughterhouses may be object of derogation, as concentration of these devices is increasing during the last years.

In Switzerland, the old pending applications for PDOs for Boutefas and jambon de la Borne demonstrate the difficulties to prove the link between the geographical origin of the raw pork meat and the final processed product (especially as it is smoked). Due to the standardization in the pig meat supply-chain, the differentiation of a specific kind of pigs linked to a geographical area seems to require some re-creation. Even if the limit between renewal and invention is not always clear, can a GI be based on re-created natural and human factors? Or, in other words: is not any formalization of the product's specification a kind of invention, to some extent?

Even if, in the PGI specification, there is no qualitative requirement on the raw meat which would justify a geographical limitation for supply, this issue is still debated. As an example, all Swiss PGI processed meat products restrict the geographical source of raw meat to Switzerland, except the Bündnerfleisch. This was the first PGI to be registered in Switzerland, and the fact that it can be produced from Argentinian or Brazilian meat was strongly opposed by consumers' associations. This is also a product with a specific market: an important part of the production is exported, and a large part is also consumed in restaurants, so without labelling to the consumers.

In France, the list of PDO meats and meat products quite reduced during a long time (excepted for the PDO Poulet de Bresse), recently increased during the last years. We can notice that beef is now well represented as 4 PDO have been applied (3 are already registered) often based on local breeds (Taureau de Camargue, Maine-Anjou, Charolais) while one is based on the very particular fattening practice (a mountain hay with an endemic aromatic plant) without a mandatory genotype. According to the processed meat products, several applications have been implemented but, till now, only one registration (dry cured pork meat from Corsica) has been completed. These PDO on processed products are always based upon the valorisation of local breeds in specific areas. On the contrary, a great number of PGI meat and meat products are registered from France (mainly through simplified procedure before 2006) based on regional organization of the supply chain.

The analysis of several case-studies among these applications leads to emphasize some critical questions identified during field-studies. The organoleptical dimensions of the meat are quite uneasy to define, as little vocabulary does exist and criteria have often to be invented. Specificity of the environments where animals are reared has to be clarified such as floristic components or landscape features. Local genotypes or crossbreeding must be connected to interaction with the environments. The production systems are designed with some particularities as special fattening, compensatory growth, seasonality of the available resources. The downstream plays a great role in the final characteristics of the meat, as slaughtering methods, carcasses preparation (chilling, freezing). The local actors show also diverse capacities of initiative, diverse abilities for area delimitation, and contrasted organizational features for ensuring the territorial governance.

Conclusions

Throughout the diversity of the case-studies we could analyze in Switzerland and France, some main findings are emerging. Terroir shows its systemic nature with several interacting elements enhancing some "deviation" from standard production. Local knowledge seems to be a core component of these co-building approaches, mixing heterogeneous actors around the same interest. On the research point of view, we emphasize the necessity of multi-disciplinary approaches.

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