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[Stand out among the mountain cheese designations of origin]

[This paper focuses on the promotion of cheese products linked to a geographical origin, based on a comparison of several French or European mountain examples. It is based on a simple observation, which can be found in a number of countries that have labelled their cheese products: the search for a specific demarcation within PDOs, or even PGIs, which have already been in place, sometimes even for a very long time.

As PDO labelling in itself is already a process of differentiation, distinction and protection of specific products, there is reason to question this type of qualitative approach, which can be described as 'over-distinction', and which can be very diverse: mountain pasture production, production from hay milk, association with an emblematic place or a particular breed, farmhouse production, etc.

Some of these qualitative distinctions refer to ancient configurations and to the construction in their time of PDOs that voluntarily associated farmhouse and dairy cheeses (cantal, gruyère, reblochon, saint-nectaire...). Others are more recent and express the desire to distinguish themselves in order to enhance the value of the finished product (use of hay milk, for example). In some cases, internal distinctions bring back old practices that may have created over time a scale of value for the product that has become a designation of origin. This is the case of the "Alpine cheese of the Ticino Alps", a recent designation which in fact federates traditional productions within which that of the Piura Alpine pasture was considered as the reference of the Ticino alpine pastures, the scale of the sale prices of the different alpine "crus" being determined even today in reference to that of the "Piura". This brings us closer to the logic of the Bordeaux wine classification of 1855. For its part, the Beaufort PDO has progressively institutionalised over the last 60 years a scale of value associating Beaufort (implied to be winter, made from hay milk), summer Beaufort (implied to be made from grass) and Alpine chalet Beaufort (made at altitude). Many other examples of internal differentiation could be cited (Picodon "Dieulefit method", Salers cheese made from the milk of Salers cows, farmhouse Morbier cheese, maturing times for Parmigiano Reggiano or Comté cheese, etc.).

These current processes of 'over-distinction', which we can see are partly rooted in traditions and technical know-how, give rise to several types of remarks and questions that we wish to explore in greater depth in this paper.

Why this search for distinction? Experience shows that we can find here, to a large extent, legacies of the history of cheese making, particularly in the case of PDOs that bring together farmhouse and dairy production under the same umbrella. However, the movement may have more recent, contemporary roots, and in this case reflects a desire for internal distinction, most often within designations with less restrictive specifications. The objective is above all economic and aims to

make better use of the raw material through the actions of companies (or small groups) that respect specific specifications, more demanding than the "simple" decree of designation of origin common to the whole sector. The example of Auvergne cheeses illustrates these situations, with numerous promotions of raw milk production, hay-based feeding, and even the revival of farmhouse production, with even extreme cases of withdrawal of the designation of origin. In the context of post-collectivist transitional agriculture, Slovak cheeses show similar attempts to distinguish themselves within PGIs granted on a very broad basis and in fact associating products that are not very homogeneous. In all cases, the important thing is to analyse the processes of construction of this 'over-distinction', to isolate the actors, to characterise them, to question the qualitative supplement provided by these approaches as well as the processes of territorial anchorage generally associated. Is the "over-distinction" accompanied by a real qualitative differentiation or does it result from more commercial attitudes that only highlight an image, for example, or a provenance that are in fact already contained in the "generic" designation?

For what results? Beyond the observation of this phenomenon of overqualification, the interest of the scientific analysis is to consider the results of such approaches, both on the economic and legal levels. On the latter aspect, we rarely see any legal transposition of the phenomenon, even if the names 'summer Beaufort' and 'mountain chalet Beaufort' are well recorded in the PDO decree and even if specific production conditions almost always appear to distinguish between farmhouse and dairy production, with specific marking (green and red plates). From an economic point of view, the data are partial, but the researcher notes that there is an additional value associated with these 'over-differentiation' approaches, which is a sign of both the effectiveness of these strategies and, often, their necessity within official quality signs that do not value the raw material well (Auvergne cheeses in particular).

Our paper will therefore aim to investigate this question of 'over-differentiation' by using a general framework (that of labelling processes and the development of specifications common to all products within the appellation of origin, the latter protecting one know-how and not several) and local and regional examples. The latter are taken at the European level through our knowledge base, mainly French, supplemented by various surveys conducted in other European countries as well as by a research programme financed by the AURA Region and relating to the labelling of products under GI in France, French-speaking Switzerland and Slovakia.

The relationships between the dynamics of our research theme and the sustainability of agri-food systems appear complex. This sustainability must be understood primarily in terms of relevance, market strategy and good environmental management. On the one hand, 'over-differentiation' within a geographical indication generally implies less intensification of practices and results in a better valorisation of finished products, thus favouring the takeover of farms and cheese dairies. The movement is therefore in the direction of more sustainable environmental management. On the other hand, this strategy of "going for the top" carries the risk of trivialising the rest of the GI production (raw milk compared to pasteurised milk, farmhouse compared to dairy, differences in maturing times, etc.), with the opposite risks for the majority of products, which then tend to be subject to internal competition within the GI, and call into question the relevance of the approach. The management of these differences refers to the management of the specifications and questions the capacity of these specifications to take into account the notions of sustainability of practices. It should also be remembered that the dynamics of over-differentiation often concern relatively small volumes (but not always), which mechanically limits their impact in terms of sustainability.]



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