

Interview

A Sociology of Wine – Reflections from my Kitchen Table

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ABSTRACT

In this paper Dr. Peter J. Howland—former bureaucrat, concrete block maker, journo (investigative and sports), publican, apple picker, bank clerk (for one week), gas station attendant (for two weeks), horse-racing results editor and now, wine scholar and practicing neo-Marxist Sociologist—reflexively interviews himself on the current situations in the ‘Sociology of Wine’ while sitting at his kitchen table nursing a newly inserted ‘bionic’ elbow and arm, drinking a local Pinot Noir, and ‘floating’ along on a concoction of painkillers and anti-inflammatories.

Given his somewhat physically and socially unsettled circumstances, Howland is unsurprisingly drawn to discussing one of his grumpy old man ‘pet peeves’—that is how in the sociological study of wine the foundational and enduring materialities of commercial winemaking—and especially its botanical and economic affordances—are often under-analysed at best or at worst, are demonised as reductive and outmoded. Consequently, Howland argues with himself that these factors are also often overwhelmed by the bling of ‘flashy cultural turns’ in analysis and theorizing. He calls on sociologists far abler than himself to ensure the foundational and the obvious are an integral part of all wine scholarship—much like the laws of motion are always accounted for in physics research. Howland points to a number of studies that successfully (or at least, that commendably attempt to) combine both the foundational and the cultural turning—ideally highlighting their mutual constitutions and contradictions.

Keywords: wine, sociology, economic affordances, botanical affordances, elbows

INTRODUCTION

Peter/Peter: Kia ora koutou katoa and welcome to our conversational essay, our text-based podcast, our dictated article, on the Sociology of Wine for this special edition. We/I am generating this article using the dictate function on Word as I recently fell off an extension ladder while undertaking house renovations and shattered my left elbow and arm. I now find myself sitting with myself at my kitchen table in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, recuperating with a recently inserted ‘bionic’ arm and elbow among other injuries, still immersed in a lingering fog of meds—anaesthetics, painkillers, anti-inflammatories and strong antibiotics—finding myself up against a pressing deadline (albeit with very understanding and patient editors—thanks David and co), and about to take up the editors’ and the journal’s call for innovativeness by indulging in a bit of hubristic reflexive sociology in interviewing my good self on my take on the Sociology of Wine (my less than good self will remain of course a matter for counsellors, loved ones and judicial authorities, while my ruminations on the sociology of other alcohols and beverages will be saved for another time).

So, unable to type effectively and wholly incapable of dictating an academic article (there is a huge disjuncture between my academic writing and talking—the former attempts to be performatively erudite, while the latter frequently betrays my working-class, mildly dyslexic background), I thought I could simply ‘rant’ as I often do in lectures—mostly free-form, though in this case guided by six questions (six being the number of wine bottles in a case) and suitably fortified by the lubrications of a bottle of locally produced Martinborough Pinot.¹ Of course, whether this will constructively *in vino veritas* my kitchen table reflections or rather will inebriatedly inhibit the same remains to be seen—indeed, much like the taste and experience of a bottle of wine this interview will be primarily an ‘experienced good’.

Although to be honest, I have a feeling that my material circumstances such as they are—nursing a shattered arm along with a thoroughly bruised ego and all the while increasingly ‘feeling the effects’ of mixing red wine and Tramadol—will result in a rant focused on one of my clearly related, but definitely pet, peeves. In this I am frequently concerned by how the structural and material fundaments (and I mean this in every sense of the word) of capitalist production—and its default operational exploitations, stratifications, territorialities and schizophrenic constructive destructiveness (Harvey, 2014)²—are frequently under-analyzed by social science scholars. Scholars who do know better, but whom in their frenetic rush for tenure, promotions, and to also demonstrate their intellectual smarts, strategically exclude the obvious and especially the economic and botanical obvious in terms of wine manufacture.

Of course, I recognize the intersecting provocations that many social scientists face. On one Adam Smithian hand, capitalism dictates that the vast majority sell their labour in order to simply eat. While on the other Medicis-slash-Platonic hand, academia craves commodity novelty in the form of analytical and theoretical originality—ergo to sell your academic labour you need to produce originalities that go way beyond merely re-stating the obvious. Then on a third Doreian hand many academics still crave the A-grades and teacher’s admiring smiles they have received throughout their often unbroken schooling careers. Add a fourth hand clapping, that is an industry that is all sensual products, seductive high cultural capitals, charming middle-class artisans, conviviality and hospitality (if not down-right good times), all bewitchingly wrapped up by incredibly slick marketing departments, and the clarion calls toward generating equally sophisticated, nuanced and erudite ‘cultural turns’ in the sociology of wine are amplified to the point of being deafening.

Furthermore, most scholars do know better. But this only adds to the general malaise. Indeed, why include the obvious when everyone around you is already in the know. The upshot is that many wine scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, and especially the sociological-esque,³ risk essentializing capitalism by either forgetting its historical constructedness and then absencing its diagnostic import by uncritically assuming its presence, by framing its operations as normative rather than normal or habitual, and by failing to explicitly integrate its fundamentals into their critical analysis. Ideally, we should all—my good self included—be consistently highlighting both winemaking’s fundamentals and its cultural constructedness in mutually constitutive, non-reductive, analytically insightful, terms.

Fortunately, I have always lacked the smarts, came to academia after another lifetime of an odds and sods mix of blue and white (pale blue?) collar jobs, and lucked into tenure at an agricultural university where the most expected of the social scientists is that they don’t spook the horses when driving around campus (I jest of course—honk, honk!). As such I don’t particularly aspire to lofty academic or intellectual heights—I mean look what happens when I climb a ladder in the real world! Though of course this could also mean that I’m missing the point entirely or that my argument only applies to reservations about my own work. In either case readers should take this one piece of advice—stop reading now... or is that forthwith?

In fact, talking of elbows and wine first reminded me of Benjamin Franklin—one of the founding fathers of the United States, philosopher, scientist, inventor, polymath, first United States Ambassador to France (thanks Wikipedia), and most importantly for the purposes of this article, a great lover of French wine. Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to a French friend of his, humorously demonstrated God’s divine Providence in the affairs of humankind by sketching a series of drawings that demonstrated how the ‘correct’ positioning of the human elbow enabled a wine glass to be bought directly to the lips, while the ‘incorrect’ positioning resulted in disaster.⁴ My elbow was up

¹ Martinborough is a small rural service town and boutique wine village situated in the South Wairarapa and approximately one hour’s drive from the capital city of Wellington. It is my primary site of my PhD research. Most of Martinborough’s twenty plus vineyards are classified as Category I wineries producing less than 200,000 litres annually and are noted for their Pinot Noirs.

² Many of the in-text citations were of course added after the article had been dictated, as was some of the content in response to the reviewers’ feedback—thanks people for your positive appraisals and constructive change suggestions. Any omissions, errors or outright lies remain of course the responsibility of at least one of the authors.

³ For example, marketing, management and business studies that use (and abuse) sociological theories and analyses.

⁴ See - <http://theobligatescientist.blogspot.com/2010/08/benjamin-franklin-on-wine-god-and.html>

near my shoulder a few weeks ago and as such providential wine drinking and academic contemplations were both off the table... But I digress, pray tell me Peter what is our first question and answer to ourselves?

VINO-MONOLOGUES ‘ACROSS’ A KITCHEN TABLE

Peter: What initially sparked your interest in researching wine?

Peter: I first thought about studying the production of wine when an undergraduate student at Victoria University in Wellington, the capital city of Aotearoa New Zealand. I was majoring in anthropology, and I was very interested in turning the discipline’s ethnographic, cross-cultural, relativistic lens on to the Western middle-classes and especially on to their normative, habitual actions and interactions with a view to constructively disrupting their existence by empathetically detailing, interrogating, and deconstructing. My ultimate goal was to research when and how the middle-classes are firstly constructed, disciplined and affirmed by current economic and political systems, and then how they are beneficially enabled and/or detrimentally limited, duped, and disenfranchised at the same time. Indeed, as a mature student (I entered university aged 29-30 years old) who, had been employed in everything from concrete block making in Dickensian factory conditions to tea-drinking, glide-time paper shuffling in Government bureaucracies to rabid tabloid journalism, I was painfully aware that the greatest economic and political power—capitalistic and faux democratic—lay in the unexamined everyday. Besides I had read Marx’s *Das Capital* in a bath above a pub in Chingford, England, while on my OE (overseas experience) and in between cleaning the cellar and opening the bar for the morning drunks.

At first, I had romantic visions of undertaking ethnographic research on a French vineyard—who hasn’t and Marx would have surely approved—even though I knew my second language acquisition skills were paltry (my first language skills are often a bit wanting also!). I had observed, but not visited, French vineyards while travelling and my wine experience before university was very limited to simply visiting wine shops and off-licences in England. Indeed, as a working class lad my only notable wine experiences before nervously visiting a Martinborough vineyard as an aspiring middle-class university student-slash-adjunct academic (I was literally sweating through my shirt as I sat down with the wholly intimidating winemaker), were drinking an amazing first growth Alsace gewurztraminer with a more mature, wine cellar-keeping, journalism student some years before departing on my OE (I can still taste the passionfruit and lychee flavours near 40 years later); then a few years later I equally enjoyed a memorable, summer-burst, red Zinfandel in a small Italian restaurant on a cold winter’s night in Welwyn Garden City, just down the road from George Bernard Shaw’s Hertfordshire residence with its octagonal rotating writing hut, while unsuccessfully flirting with an attractive young individual from Persia. I don’t recall their name, but then again I don’t remember the wine label either. The wine, however, was delicious.

Anyway, the reflexive sociological upshot was that I eventually researched boutique wine production and wine tourism in Martinborough and their role in generating various middle-class identities, status, values and practices for my PhD, which I submitted in 2008. In many respects for me the study of wine has always represented a modality, a research vehicle, in which the various ideas, beliefs, discourses, silences, interactions and practices of the middle-classes can be robustly engaged and interrogated. Indeed, whatever rocks your intersecting analytical boat—gender, ethnicity, age, place, time, production, consumption, social distinction, agriculture, industrialization, globalization and speciesism (if that’s a word)—can all be robustly researched through the study of wine. Not as a Durkheimian ‘total social fact’ (Durkheim, 1895: 50)—that would be alcohol or beverages per se—but rather as a delineated, yet wholly socially immersed and constituted, ‘total social field’. Moreover, a field that encompasses the Ritzerian ‘solids’ or nature capital⁵ of botany, chemistry and geography as it applies to grape growing and wine making respectively, along with the solidish economics pertaining to commercial winemaking at the minimal level of financial sustainability across primary, secondary and tertiary levels of production—however achieved. And on through to the arbitrary and fluid, and yet wholly historically contingent, constructs of identity, status, desire, imagination and every other practice in-between.

Interestingly many of the classical economists such as Smith, Ricardo, and Marx referenced wine growing as case studies (Chaikind, 2012), particularly with regard to the imposition of regional and country-based taxes, tariffs,

⁵ Nature capital necessarily predates, and also ultimately transcends, all ecological, economic, cultural, scientific and any other ‘interpreting’ and ‘translating’ mediations of humanity that attempt to define and articulate its existence. As such, nature capital essentially has two registers—one unknown, the other known (which is also a subset of cultural capital). In the latter register it is mediated (that is articulated, classified, deployed, etc) through Bourdieu’s other capitals—economic, social, symbolic and cultural. However, we must always assume there is a ‘green box’ of natural capacities that remain unrecognised yet operational and significant. Key nature capitals of wine grapes that science with its probabilistic limits has recognised include grape vines’ environmental and seasonal adaptability, sweet fruits, naturally occurring yeasts on grape skins that spontaneously provoke fermentation of embodied sugars into alcohol, and a highly complex amalgamation of sugars, acids, tannins, etc., that produce juices with an unrivalled sensitivity to variations in weather, climate, topography, soil conditions (particularly water availability) and to viticultural and vinicultural interventions (Howland, 2019).

value generation, and in Marx's case—poverty also. Indeed, Marx's first published works—newspaper articles written after completing his dissertation—dealt with the lot of the perennially poor in relation to the Law of the Theft of Wood in the first instance, and the economic distress of Mosel winemakers caused by Prussian taxes, tariffs and administrative incompetence in the second. Marx's lawyer father had owned vineyards in Trier, Germany for 30 years or so, which Marx inherited and briefly owned following his father's death. It has been argued that these articles mark the origin of Marx's interest in economics (Lubasz, 1976) and according to some “Wine ultimately made Marx a communist” (Reichert, 2018) ... not to mention the fact that Marx greatly enjoyed drinking fine wine and especially when his great friend Engels was footing the bill.

As such I have found Bourdieu's essentially neo-expansive Marxian/Weberian/Durkheimian theory of generative, evolving habitus, fields, distinctions and practice (Bourdieu, 1979, 1980), which manifest via both the unconscious or reflexive, institutionalized and ‘objective’ deployment of varied configurations of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals—and I would, of course, also add the influence of nature capital—within and between various intersecting, mutually constitutive fields of action and power that results in position, taste and status differentiations as a particularly good starting point to comprehend the ‘total social field’ of wine. More specifically, a lot of contemporary wine hype is focused on the individual—especially on the figures of the consummate middle-class artisan winemaker and the increasingly globalized, middle-class, sovereign consumer (Howland, 2008, 2013). Thus, mythologies of reflexive agency, cultivated tastes, invented histories, rituals and traditions, dispositional social distinctions, and place and product authenticities abound within the wine industry, an industry which—somewhat in contradiction to its imaginings—marches, or is marched, along to the enduring structural beats of commodity-based production and the market-based sale of an alcoholic beverage made from the juice of a seasonal, botanical entity. Thus, the wine industry in all its fundamentals and variations is a great platform to consider how individuals, institutions and structures—especially economic, social, cultural, political and moral—generatively intersect in both deeply conservative and evolutionary dynamic ways. It is also a great opportunity to mimic or channel Bourdieu (exaggerated deep breath), and if not to ultimately consider the ‘meanings of life’, at least to critically interrogate its collective and varied ‘modes of being’.

Actually, did you know that Bourdieu was apparently a fan of rugby (Grenfell, 2015), which is another reason to like his theorizing—perhaps the main one for a former rugby journo-turned-Aotearoa New Zealand-based sociologist.

Peter: Well yes, perhaps... but more to the point how does the Sociology of Wine specifically fit into all of this?

Peter: There is no sociology of wine per se. Arguably there is a sociology of economics under which wine studies should mostly nestle, but rather what we have is the sociological and sociological-esque research of wine. The former is nascent and emergent, with a few, albeit growing number of sociology practitioners on the ground bringing their sociological imaginations and optics, methods, theorizing, analysis and modes of communication to bear on questions of wine; while the latter—the sociological-esque—potentially encompasses everything from economics (including marketing and management studies) to geography to history, with a little bit of botany, genetics, chemistry and climatology thrown into the mix. All of which is of course of interest to any social scientists taking a holistic, all-encompassing approach to the study of wine in its industry specifics and social entreties. Indeed, the discipline boundaries in wine scholarship are highly permeable, which is to be expected for a relatively new field of study.

There are however some general sociology trends evident in the study of wine—these are adroitly outlined by Prof. Jennifer Smith Maguire in the Routledge Handbook of Wine Culture (Charters, 2022) and similarly by Prof. David Inglis and Drs Anna-Mari Almila and Hang Kei Ho in this volume. In the Handbook, Prof. Smith Maguire cogently argues that recent sociology-based research is marked by the ‘cultural turn’ of doing wine in three main areas or fields; firstly, how multiple social actors play roles in the cultural construction of the meaning and value of wine and its legitimate social uses. These actors include an array of cultural producers and intermediaries, certifying bodies, market organisations and more specifically wine makers, winery staff, journalists, critics, sommeliers, restaurateurs, consumers, and of course, wine scholars. Second, is the exploration of how discourses and processes legitimise what is (and is not) ‘good’ about wine and its consumption—especially the cultural, social and symbolic capitals associated with fine wine, it's connections to the reportedly non-replicable aspects of terroir, and consumption primarily for aesthetic and sociability purposes. While the third concerns question of taste and the reproduction of legitimate wine cultures and associated social stratifications and hierarchies.

I would add that this research exists on a continuum from the industry-facing and socially conservative that seeks to enhance the status quo by increasing markets or market shares and by also seeking out ever-increasing profits, reduced costs, by placating shareholders, and so on. In the mid-range research is still industry-facing but is linked to and highlights broader social modalities such as the rise of middle-class omnivorism, the construction of taste, value and luxury, globalization, industrialization, place of origin discourses, and so on. This research is often light on the critical analysis of the capitalistic and ecological exploitations, stratifications, inequities, and unsustainability that one finds at the polar opposite end of the continuum in terms of studies that are both

industry and society critical. At this end of the continuum is where the moral obligation of sociologists to pursue the betterment of humankind through the critical application of the sociological imagination is arguably in full flight... or is that in full ferment?

So at one end of the continuum we find economists who are staunch in their industry-facing outlooks and in what amounts to cost/benefit analyses, and while some management and marketing scholars claim a modicum of sociological insights, these also are typically limited in terms of critical analysis and as such remain essentially industry-facing—ditto sociologists working in or toward the mid-range of the continuum—for example, focusing on consumer behaviour, where they state what is normative and/or peripheral, and then critically assess how these insights could be manipulated to increase sales, develop market segments, and so on.

Now I'm not going to name who I think is situated where on the continuum as all research has some merit and even simply identifying status quo patterns and trends is sociologically informative. Indeed, I certainly use a lot of industry-facing research in developing my own analyses which at least gestures toward the industry and society-critical end of the continuum. Besides overall there is a small pool—or is that a small vat—of wine scholars overall, so fulsome collaboration is still the most constructive research strategy at this point. Moreover, I have never personally subscribed to the theoretical and ideological genealogies—the almost consanguineal inclusions and exclusions—that marks and inhibits so much sociology (and philosophy and economics for that matter), and instead I retain Anthropology-inspired magpie-ship and am attracted to a wide variety of shiny things in creating my own analysis.

In addition, however, I would also note that there are problems with the 'cultural turn' identified by Prof. Smith Maguire for both sociologists and others studying wine. No doubt the 'cultural turn' is good for detailing the symbolic, the discourse driven, the passionate, creative, imaginative, and even the mythological or fabricated in winemaking, and in wine promotions and consumption especially. It can also, at times, critically highlight the social distinctions, stratifications, inclusions and exclusions of wine, along with the different logics, beliefs and values at play way beyond the vulgar Marxism of economic determinism. Yet without a robust grounding in foundational economic concerns such as surplus value production, of labour use and abuse, in monopoly rents based on the terroir-based exclusivities of land use and seasonal vintages, and in the Machiavellian machinations of large transnational investors and industrial wine-making enterprises, a lot of wine scholarship remains effectively industry-facing, if not industry-led or complicit. And this is without considering the concerns of wine frauds or the potential health issues of consumption—and here I am thinking especially of the wine inebriation issues faced by consumers.⁶ Indeed it is also without critical consideration of ecological concerns caused by monocropping, pesticide/insecticide use, water use, waste issues and sustainability per se. In other words, without a solid grounding in the default exploitations, contrived limited good, intrinsic stratifications, exclusions and inequities of capitalist production and distribution, a lot of sociological research demonstrates a marked tentativeness, even timidity.

Obviously, I am being intentionally OTT and provocative. Nevertheless, all of us need to be vigilant to the fact that the wine industry is a very good news, good narrative, industry. I'm not saying there are not good practices—indeed many of the native tree planting initiatives of typically small-scale winemakers in Aotearoa New Zealand are highly laudable, as well as being conscience-assuaging and yeast-promoting for what are a cultivated bunch of mono-croppers. However, in being industry-facing scholars run the very real risk of unwittingly reproducing the biases and vested interests of methodological capitalism, methodological nationalism (Beck, 2007; Chernilo, 2017), even methodological genetic-ism (if that's a word). As such capitalist regimes of production, exchange, consumption etc, are essentialized, framed a priori, sometimes as wholly innate and certainly as the apex of human endeavour and therefore not necessary to subject to critical interrogation and comparison—historical, cross-cultural, utopian or idealistic. While nation-states, countries, and even regions of origin are regarded as the most appropriate meta-units of analysis in spite of the globalised mobility and networking of labour, capital, products, discourses and ideas. Thus, what are in fact dynamic assemblages consisting of different, competitive, often divisive, entities and enterprises that are founded on structural exploitation and stratification, are flattened into undifferentiated, seemingly collective, productively constructive and benign, nationally-situated masses. At the same time the foundational, indeed truth-full, affordances, thresholds, enablements, limitations and opportunities of the genetic, biological, botanical, chemical of grape-growing and wine-making—and even of the slightly less foundational and truth-fullness of commercially viable, ideally profitable, commodity and market-based wine-making—are often significantly overlooked. Although admittedly there are very understandable reasons for this timidity which affect all wine scholars...

Would you like a top up? Your glass is nearly empty.

Peter: Ah... yes please—this wine is delightful, thanks... now umm, so what are these reasons for this apparent tentativeness or timidity?

⁶ See <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/parenting/113911596/the-myths-behind-the-wine-mum-hidden-drinking-culture-in-new-zealand>

Peter: Well, several come immediately to mind, although as a way of premising my remarks on this issue I would note the following: As all sociology undergrads are taught, sociological studies of anything and everything, including wine, need to be firmly and foundationally situated in the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). Thus, one must be always cognizant that the private is always public, the individual is always social, the micro is always macro, the evolving is always structural, and vice-versa; that social action and interactions are always historically contingent and constantly evolving—albeit some phenomena are more enduring than others; and that all human endeavour involves the various manifestations and negotiations of power from the command regimes of Kim Jong-un and the duplicities of Bill Gates through to the influential seductions of pouting social media influencers. Thus, the sociological study of wine needs to be firstly situated in a broader, holistic, all-encompassing sociology of economics—commodity and market-based or otherwise (there is a lot of gifting and giving away in wine—see Howland, n.d.)—with constant reference also to all other associated social variables, from politics to religion to place and time to the imagined to discourse to dispositional praxis, and so on. No stone unturned, no vine unpruned, no bottle uncorked, so to speak.

Now there will be many readers rolling their eyes and groaning about me somewhat pretentiously, and somewhat naively, stating the obvious, let alone the broad brush—some would say crude finger-painting—that I have used to characterize wine scholarship as a continuum. Although I make no apologies for this, as the obvious, the foundational, the fixed and the solid, even the solidish, are often overlooked by wine scholars of various social science varietals. For example, where are the studies that explain why grape wine, and especially *Vitis vinifera* grape wine, is so ubiquitous? And why, and how come, parsnip wine isn't? I've tried parsnip wine and it was very delicate and elegant in its one-note flavour. I've also had a beetroot wine that was mildly hallucinogenic. So why aren't natural beetroot wines currently flooding the market man? And once you've ascertained why grape wine, you need to then explore what attributes they are accorded. What attributes are muted or ameliorated? How does this both create and interpellate wine connoisseurs, discerning amateurs and the great mass of uninformed middle-class imbibers? Let alone how is it used to justify, even celebrate monocropping, bourgeoisie profiteering and opportunism, let alone the performative liberations of reflexive artisanship. Indeed, where do greater and lesser profits lie (as in reside as well as deceive) in all these discourses and practices of taste, value and social distinction? As Marx (1867), Harvey (2014), and many others have noted capitalist, market-based commodity production has a number of dominant and enduring logics (not to mention contradictions), some of which I have already mentioned. And so do grapes—botanical, seasonal and evolutionary. Not to mention the thresholds and potential adaptations that climate change is 'occasioning'. Will pinot noir come to be called by any other name? Many certainly will have different taste configurations if my recent introduction to the flavour outcomes occasioned by climate change and amplified by shifts to organic production are any indication of a different future. They will also have newly rendered justificatory discourses. One winemaker told me that his newly bottled, highly perfumed, almost honeyed Pinot will "probably be promoted as a pinot to be drunk early" ("Maybe at breakfast instead of honey on toast" was my immediate thought response). Portents of a very different palate future indeed.

Now again many will be rolling their eyes as any sociologist worth their salt knows all of this and more fundamentals besides. More importantly, restating the fundamentals repeatedly to demonstrate how they are often conservatively, as opposed to dynamically, reproduced—at least in terms of maintaining their structural logics and principles—will not win you many originality points. And therein lies the rub. Sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, indeed social scientists of any hue are richly rewarded—if not compelled—to undertake original research, to generate original analysis and insights, to develop original methodologies. PhD regs demand it, publishers slavishly crave it, and academic promotions and reputations depend on it. Moreover, combine this with limited publishing opportunities compared to the hard sciences, and originality clearly rules. Not surprisingly then pursuing the many and varied 'cultural turns' in wine without factoring in or even explicitly linking to the fundamentals is clearly the expedient strategy. Although again compare this to the hard sciences—woe betide any physicist who doesn't factor in Newton's laws of motion, biologist who overlooks DNA, or chemist who overlooks the law of conservation of mass. Hard scientists can, and ideally should, contest these fundamentals whenever they can demonstrate what was previously thought solid is in fact shifting ground, but they can never, ever, ignore them. Yet in sociology and elsewhere the frenetic pursuit of originality clearly wins out and while the resulting 'cultural turns' are often very dynamic, very clever and a lot of intellectual fun to produce, the resulting analyses are often partial, tentative, and even timid in ignoring the fundamental, and especially so when industry-facing. I would argue that without taking into account the fundamentals of winemaking, I'm not sure if it is even good or robust social science.

Of course, the research that sociologists and others undertake is significantly—though obviously not exclusively—dependent on the 'face' or 'faces' that agents of the wine industry choose to show. In this respect the industry—aside from being a relentlessly a good news industry—is globally dominated by large, industrial wine manufacturers, many of whom are large transnational conglomerations with very slick marketing departments. Even many small, family-based, artisan winemakers are very skilled and practiced narrators of their own fortunes

(again—in both senses of the word). Indeed, whenever, wherever, winemakers plant a vine, up pops a triumphal, justificatory, story! Like all powerful entities and successful enterprises in capitalism, good winemakers dedicate significant resources to controlling their public-facing narratives and as such they typically do not want, nor need to, accommodate the research aspirations of critical scholars. Indeed, even industry-facing scholars such as economists have to work very hard to get beyond annual report embellishments and good news stories.

As a result, most sociological wine researchers only have access to small to medium-scale, boutique, artisan winemakers, along with ordinary, everyday wine drinkers. The artisan winemakers are the ‘face’ of the industry, even though they typically produce much less wine than industrial scale manufacturers.⁷ In wine-based promotions and the wine media, the artisan winemaker fulsomely represents much of which is contemporaneously celebrated in wine-making—passion, creativity, sociability, hospitality, urbane tastes, relentless work ethics, scientific acuity, and eternal, utopian-esque quests to make ever better wines. As such it is almost impossible not to admire most small-scale winemakers, nor to be incredibly grateful for the time and effort they give in being interviewed and even more so in accommodating ethnographic fieldwork. Nevertheless, they are just as unlikely to ‘open their books’ having neither the time nor inclination. Besides many artisan winemakers I know have little or no idea of what it costs them to produce a bottle of wine nor how to systematically retail price their own bottles—which is sort of admirable in its own right.

However, in spite of all of this small-scale winemakers are nevertheless necessarily duplicitous in all the default exploitations, stratifications, injustices, exclusions and inclusions of capitalist production—albeit admittedly in ways and degrees not as obvious as large-scale, shareholder beholden, industrial producers. Yet they also make wines in ways that are complicated and potentially contradictory to the dominant logics of capitalist production. Not knowing the costs of their labour for example, and not knowing how to price a bottle of wine with anything approaching economic acuity. Moreover, many are at least partially aware—like many of us—of their duplicity and are committed to ameliorating the situation best they can. Although they too are up against powerful structures and institutions that are equally committed to entrenching, if not enhancing, the status-quo. Indeed, many are committed to leaving the world a little better than they found it and the numbers committed to native-tree planting in Aotearoa New Zealand—both privately and publicly—to overcome the ecological negatives of mono-cropping is impressive. While some are even interested in critical analysis of their practice, though they do tend to mine this for that which they believe will constructively benefit their businesses.

Peter: So where would you situate your own sociological study of wine?

Peter: Actually, at this point I'd rather address a question about whether there is anything within these circumstances that constructively points a way ahead for critical sociological studies of wine?

Peter: Fair enough ... I'm assuming there is?

Peter: I'm glad you asked, yes, indeed there is. Although highlighting exploitations, inequities and so on might appear as low-hanging fruit especially in terms of analytical obviousness and lack of originality, this does not mean these fruits are not sweet. Moreover, when it comes to structural processes and the associated practices of large scale, economically and politically powerful players such as transnational wine manufacturers and collective promotional/ lobbying groups such as NZ Wine, this fruit should be picked with gusto and vigor.

At a theoretical baseline I would point to the materiality theories of Miller (2005), Ingold's (2018) affordances and Latour's (1987) black boxes of science and technology, to which I would add Marx's red box of economics, Darwin's green box of botany and biology, and Mendeleev's transparent bell jar of chemistry. Not sure about Schrödinger's cat box—it might or it might not be helpful. Anyway, all of the above at one level or another seek to foreground the influences and consequences of the fundamental, foundational, and the-should-be-obvious to one degree or another, and as such are excellent theoretical starting points.

More specifically, there is some excellent sociological or sociological-esque, industry-critical work out there which is—if not always explicitly, then certainly very strongly implicitly—also society-critical. For example—and this is by no means exhaustive—the geographer John Overton and company's papers on the comparative GI desires and motivations of large vs. small wine-makers in Aotearoa New Zealand (Overton and Murray, 2017) and also on the use of ‘fictive capital’ and the status associated with vineyard ownership to enhance—even launder—individuals' reputations (Overton and Banks, 2015); the work of their doctoral student—now Dr Kelle Howson—on the validity of South African wines' ethical branding initiatives against a backdrop of the ‘dop’ system and other labour concerns (Howson et al., 2014); while another Aotearoa New Zealand based geographer—Nick Lewis—wrote an excellent piece on the assemblage of the local wine industry and the responses of different scale players to the fall in grape prices after a record 2008 vintage (Lewis, 2014). These geographers definitely err toward highlighting the links between the places of wine and the economics of capitalism. While the anthropologist (and

⁷ The wine industry in New Zealand, for example, is dominated by twenty large, Category 3, winemakers (each producing more than 2million litres annually), but who represent less than 3% of all registered winemakers and whom themselves are dominated by transnationals such as Constellation and Pernod Ricard. These winemakers account for anywhere between 60-80% of all wine produced—of which approximately 30-35% is exported as cheap bulk wine (NZ Wine, 2021).

my PhD examiner, now collaborator) Demossier's (2010) de-mythologisation of the French wine drinking culture, and more latterly of Burgundian (2018) terrior constructs, are similarly praiseworthy; as is Jennifer Smith Maguire's (2013, 2018) work on the strategic creation of taste and added value through the practices and deployment of constructs such as familiness, authenticity, and the work of cultural intermediaries. And of course, the early work of Ulin (1995) on the political economy of wine cooperatives was ground breaking, as was Unwin's (1991) exacting study of the development of the global wine industry and trade. While I especially like the overt industry-critical work of Matthews (2016) in debunking myths of the wine industry—particularly his dismantling of the minerality/flavour claims of terrior—an argument supported by hard science (Meinert, 2018). While there is also the sophisticated industry-society critical research of Hannickel (2010, 2013) in exploring the complicity of the wine trade in the colonialization of America and Australia. And on this note the work of historians like Guy (2003), Ludington (2013), Harding (2019), and McIntyre (2012)—while ostensibly 'neutral'—is so detailed and subtle, it not only lays down secure foundations from which to critique developments and contemporary forms in wine industries everywhere, but also provides exemplars of exacting scholarship.

Of course, in part, the 'cultural turn' in Sociology—and especially when viewed in its disciplinary entirety—resonates with similar exacting scholarship, which reveals a rich cornucopia of enduring, dominating (or at least attempting to), contradictory, peripheral and episodic praxis from the foundational to the highly dynamic. Again the low-hanging fruit of status-quo duplicity—either agentic or unwitting—must be picked but with important caveats; first, there should be an empathetic rendering of interlocutors' beliefs, values, moralities, ideals and experiences—alongside, of course, a critical outlining of their silences, inactions, absences and unknowings; second, these should be analysed in the light of nature, economic, social and other 'solids', 'fluids' and capitals; third, all evidence of the contradictory within or associated with the winemakers' normative praxis and conservative status quo should be wholeheartedly revealed and constructively critiqued before it is; fourthly critically assessed as potential pathways to alternate futures—both in winemaking specifically and in society more generally. Of course, if anything similar is discovered in large-scale, transnational wine endeavours and processes, this also needs to be brought to the fore, although perhaps through gritted teeth... I jest of course... Or do I?

I might part company with some wine scholars at the first point and especially those who believe in the inviolability or infallibility of the subject's perspectives—although these should be respected and faithfully reported, like all academics, research subjects, respondents and interlocutors are not all knowing, are also partial in experience and are intuitively biased in perspective, if not wholly vested in their own particular interests. While I will definitely diverge at the third and fourth points from those academics who believe in some form of research 'neutrality' or God forbid, analytical 'objectivity'. It is incumbent on any social scientist worth their metal to bring to bear their interpretations and learnings in full—and especially whenever those are different to those of their subjects, as long of course this is done transparently and not under the ruse of expert detachment. Being an academic is a privilege that must be fully engaged or as Marx famously said, and I paraphrase, 'Wine scholars have only interpreted the world, the point, is however, to uncork it.' And the first step toward constructive change is thinking and speaking differently, and especially when out of turn. Although I think I might be preaching to the converted when it comes to the readers of, and contributors to, this journal.

Now this fourfold approach to researching small-scale winemakers is something I significantly arrived at while working on a co-edited book on wine, terrior and utopia (Dutton and Howland, 2019) with Assoc. Prof. Jacqueline Dutton from the University of Melbourne—a noted French literature and utopian scholar, and an amazing font of wine knowledge. In researching, discussing and reading about the utopian, that is the forever striving for the better—which in wine encompasses everything from questing for ever better wines to ever better cellaring and drinking conditions, through to the seeming contradictions of commercial winemakers who defy economic rationalities to indulge in creativity, passion, art, hospitality, gifting, community care, land—product—people empathy, and so on—I came to finally realise the full import of Marx's dialectics and his associated extortions to free humankind to fully explore their creativeness and sociabilities. Indeed, the work of two other Australian-based scholars was also formative in this regard—Swinburn (2019) and his astute insights on winemaker affect and how Aboriginal notions of 'country' can practically and morally frame a vernacular notion of terrior in Australia, while Skinner (n. d.), whose research on sensory winemaking and hobbyist winemakers is likewise highly insightful and affirming. Although their work is distinctly in the cultural turn camp, by focusing on stark alternatives to contemporary commercial winemaking—potential in the case of 'country' as a vernacular terrior and current in regards to hobbyist, sensory and affect winemaking—it nevertheless serves to robustly highlight the botanical and economic foundational by inference alone. The work of both these scholars routinely has caused me to stop and take stock of my own analyses and cynical biases. In fact, I am currently editing a volume on wine and the gift, the contributions to which adroitly analyse the entangled conservativeness and contradictoriness of making wine as commodities for market sale and as gifts to give away. This volume is going to be a doozy—you should watch out for it.

Peter: Obviously I will ... however... to return to my earlier question, where would you situate your own sociological study of wine?

Peter: Well, unsurprisingly my research has always attempted to be interlocutor-empathetic, industry-critical, and society-critical. However, in saying this I am quite frustrated by the timidity of much of my published research especially in terms of both linking the industry critical to the society critical and in outlining the latter per se. Indeed, I think I was far braver or more adroit at this in my PhD thesis than I have been in subsequent publications. Although having said this the sheer scope and space of a PhD thesis allows for more unoriginal or obvious society-critical outlining and linking. Indeed, a PhD in Sociology or Anthropology almost demands the obvious society-critical, political-critical, historical-critical, and so on as a means to demonstrate the foundational sociological understandings of the submitting candidate. Then by contrast, post-PhD one is compelled to write within the word limit restrictions of journal articles and book chapters so that originality is again significantly foregrounded, moreover these scribblings are further disciplined by peer reviewers skewed toward the originalities and dynamisms of the ‘cultural turn’.

So, I suppose we could say that my research and publications are a work in progress. With this in mind I would note that I am currently working on three publications that fulfill the fourfold brief I outlined before. The first considers the legal fictions of Geographical Indicators and their role in providing moral validation for the construction of fictitious vineyard and place-of-origin wine brands by large supermarket retailers—essentially how legal codifications and capitalist marketing collude in telling big fat porkies to the benefit of the economic elite. While the other two consider the entangled roles of wine as commodity and as gift—both from a structural perspective focusing on the solidish botanical and production affordances and then from the specific economic and social habitus of boutique winemakers in Aotearoa New Zealand. But as I say, it is all very much a work in progress.

Peter: Interesting—clearly as you say you have a lot to work on. In this respect are there also gaps in the overall sociological study of wine that you think should be addressed?

Peter: For sure, with the sociological study of wine being a relatively new and emergent field there is plenty of scope for original research. However, first and foremost there is a desperate ‘need to follow the money’. That is unpacking the investments and influences of large investors—especially transnational, global and regionally dominant—in the wine industry. There is great work from Anderson and co emanating out of Adelaide in terms of identifying global trends in production and consumption—both historical and contemporary (Anderson and Pinilla, 2017; Neglen et al., 2017)—but they are restricted by the nationally-based collection of statistics and thus fall prey to the biases and limitations of methodological nationalism we discussed earlier. Rather what is needed is a robust interrogation of global, transnational, large-medium and small-scale investments in wine production, along with critical analysis of how this impacts on labour practices, wine tastes and quality valuations from bulk to fine wines, on terroir-based discourses, environmental degradations, sustainability initiatives, collusive nationalisms, and so on—a sort of Mondovino⁸ meets forensic accounting collaboration. As such this would ideally consist of analyses of annual and other financial reports, along with other less-public facing forms of financial considerations including access to boardroom deliberations and to corporate and shareholder water-cooler (or is that whiskey cabinet?) discussions. Moreover, this research needs to be undertaken from the transnational level of Constellation and Pernod Ricard for example, right down to family-based and artisan winemakers. Now, make no mistake this research is extremely difficult to undertake successfully. Typically, the more elite a research cohort the less access accorded to social scientists. It is certainly far beyond my paltry research capacities for example and in reality would probably be best undertaken by teams of economists, accountants, actuaries and social scientists. It might even be an impossibility—especially given the gate-keeping resources of the powerful—but even then the resulting analytical gaps need to be consistently noted and accounted for as appropriate and able.

Another similar area of potential research is into the elite enclaves of luxury wine purchasing and consumption.⁹ Again this effectively entails ‘studying up’ and is a very difficult nut to crack. I’ve certainly never managed it. Indeed, I was even excluded from the exclusive annual vertical tastings on the vineyard where I undertook fieldwork as my palate was quite rightly considered to be too uninformed, too uneducated, to warrant an invitation. Smith Maguire’s (2017) research on how contemporary Chinese wine consumers—both the internationally agile and the emerging middle-classes within China—are negotiating, and are to some degree overcoming, their ‘outsider’ status in the international world of elite wine, partly through their Bordeaux-philic focus on luxury wines and chateaux, definitely provides a roadmap. Although ultimately the research focus needs to drill both down and out from the discourse of news reports and survey respondents’ narratives into the ethnographic and financial nitty gritty of social interactions, relationships and networking, and its socio-economic consequences for a wide swath of players—from casual vineyard workers and winemaker suppliers out to the Machiavellian opportunisms of high

⁸ Mondovino is a documentary (2004) directed by Jonathan Nossiter and explores the impact of globalization—in particular the influence of critics like Robert Parker and consultants such as Michel Rolland—on wine production and consumption in different wine regions around the world.

⁹ There is some consumer-based/orientated research on the luxury wine value creation and associated promotions and marketing (see Beverland, 2005, 2006).

finance. I know, however, there is a researcher who has cracked invites to elite, invitation-only, wine galas held in Hong Kong, where winemakers from Bordeaux and Burgundy grandly showcase (or it that flog?) their grand cru wines and induct notable locals into their Brotherhoods¹⁰. Once this researcher hits their analytical groove this will prove to be very valuable research, as would ethnographic and other research into exclusive wine clubs, the collectors of elite and historic wines, elite wine auctions and so on.

Meanwhile at the other end of the spectrum there is desperate need for research into failed vineyards and wineries, with ‘failure’ including everything from economic insolvency, succession failure or simply wine quality failure. Again, this is a difficult nut to crack. Personally, I have had three insolvent winemakers lined up to interview, only for all to cancel or simply not turn up. Indeed, a couple told me it was just too emotional a subject for them to discuss. However, this research is needed as a foil to the relentless good news ethos of wine industry promotions.

Other than this there is also a need for research into governmental and other forms of legal-political regulation and its sociological impacts on wine production, exchange and consumption. Moreover, as mentioned earlier wine and inebriation is woefully under researched to such an extent you could not be faulted for thinking all wine consumers were budding connoisseurs temperately supping wine solely for its aesthetic taste qualities. And lastly winemaker hospitality toward researchers raises some very interesting ethical questions and conundrums that are also worthy of critical research and discussion.

Now, I’m sorry, but I have to wrap this up as I have a taxi arriving soon to whisk me away to yet another physio appointment. Obviously, I’ve been intentionally over-generalizing and provocative in places, nevertheless I hope you have found some of it at least interesting and ideally also informative.

Peter: Well... I can't speak for anyone else, but you really didn't tell me anything I didn't already know.

Peter: Touché Peter... touché.

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¹⁰ Brotherhoods such as *La Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin* in Burgundy, and *La Jurade de Saint-Emilion* and *Commanderie du Bontemps* in Bordeaux, organize invitation-only events in France and around the world (e.g. Hong Kong and USA) that promote the prestige of the French *grands crus*.

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A Sociology of Wine – reflections from my kitchen table

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