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The Geopolitics of Difference: Geographical Indications and Biocultural Otherness in the New Europe

This essay focuses on the intersection between biocultural diversity and markets by examining the application of Geographical Indications (GIs) in East European contexts as methods for protection of local culinary diversity. Designed to protect regional cultural practices and environmental particularities through marketization, GIs operate as trademarks that add value to the commodities produced in geographically bounded regions. Classic examples of GIs include Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese from the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, Bordeaux wine from France, or Vidalia onions from the US state of Georgia. Because GIs establish rent monopoly over scarce commodities, they are usually depicted as highly profitable economic devices for injecting capital into remote and economically depressed areas, supporting community livelihood, and bringing marginal skills, knowledge, and even species back to life.

Even though *in situ* conservation of biocultural diversity is not an explicit objective in the GI definitions, they have been increasingly lauded as successful ways to conserve rare breeds, disappearing cultural knowledge, traditional skills, and regional ecologies, protecting these assets from steamrolling globalization, race-to-the-bottom commercialism, and expanding monoculture economies. The fact that the potential use of intellectual property legislation (which also covers GIs) in biocultural diversity conservation became a hotly debated subject in the Doha negotiations is an indication that intellectual property laws are increasingly seen as potential tools for protecting diverse local economies, heritage, and the environments in which local food is procured.

There are at least two key features of GIs that are pertinent for understanding how markets work to protect certain aspects of biocultural diversity, particularly connoisseurship and geographic differentiation. Depending on the connoisseurship of the consumer, GIs function as knowledge-based economies where one's appreciation of taste, smell or texture, producers' skills, geographic specificities, traditional knowledge, and heritage serve as the basis for creating added economic value. By implication, the taste and knowledge of skills are usually local in nature and are embedded in particular geographic locales and social circles.

Second, as the name of “geographical indications” suggests, GIs depend on the process of geographic differentiation. This is achieved by mobilizing patrimonial values, collective memory sites, and locally embedded histories to produce distinct regional identities that figure prominently in the global markets. This means that GIs valorize a particular constellation of geographic boundedness and historical continuity of specific cultural practices and natural processes. As with other global knowledge economies, the value of GIs depends on the ability to translate a particular local taste and geographic location—to communicate reputation, quality, and value to distant consumers in global markets.

While the two qualities of GIs—connoisseurship and geographic differentiation—may seem to be easily transferable, it turns out that countries with centuries-long experience in global trade and food branding are finding themselves better situated to benefit from the protection and added values provided by GIs (Guthman 2007). Southern European countries—Italy, France, and Spain—are the winners in this approach, claiming the largest proportion of registered GIs (a total of 791 products) while numerous other countries have only found a few products that can claim GI protection. In fact, large swaths of Eastern European and Northern Eurasian territory have not produced a single GI (Estonia, Latvia, and Russia, among others, do not have any GIs registered or pending).

On the surface it may seem that this is due to the absence of a diverse food heritage in these places, an argument that echoes stereotypical images of gray-colored and drab-looking socialist consumer culture (Fehérváry 2009). To challenge such an argument, it is worth considering an example of Eastern European dumplings that reveals a different constellation of relationships between history, memory, geography, and tradition—one that does not yield to GI certification and that challenges the emphasis on connoisseurship and geographic differentiation as the location of value.

As in Italy, where many villages developed their own pastas, with different sizes, shapes, seasonal ingredients, preparation methods, and consumption rituals, Lithuania’s regions have their own distinct dumplings. Called by their generic name, the dumplings (*virtinis*) vary in size and shape, and may or may not have a filling or a special sauce. Examples include dumplings that resemble Italian ravioli, but are filled with blueberries or cherries and dressed with sour cream; dumplings that are made

by mixing cheese, flour, and egg into one piece of dough, which is divided into small squares and served in a butter sauce; or dumplings made of boiled potato and flour, resembling Italian gnocchi. The fact that there are no clear linguistic boundaries to show the differences between these dishes means that the skills, knowledge, and raw materials that go into making them do not form identifiable categories to be distinguished one from another. In other words, there are no ravioli or gnocchis, only *virtinis*. When asked, most of the cooks in Lithuania would say that *virtinis* is a “cheap” dish, served at home and under no circumstances for houseguests. These statements are remarkably different from the laudatory descriptions of the local pastas in Italy, where each household boasts of having developed a unique dish. The fact that there is no linguistic differentiation suggests that there is no basis for connoisseurship or gastronomic identity that would allow foods like Lithuanian dumplings to be certified as distinct, non-generic, local products. Not surprisingly, despite the fact that the dumpling diversity in Lithuania is now challenged by the fast-growing frozen food industry that sells only four types of dumplings at supermarkets, the existing GI certification is unable to protect locally existing food traditions and knowledge.

As well as posing challenges to the connoisseurship dimension of GIs, Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia have undergone major political and economic shifts that have disrupted the historical continuity of traditions and their connections to particular places, making the processes of geographic differentiation and relative stability that colonial centers have historically enjoyed almost impossible. The history of population resettlement projects during Russian Imperial rule, massive displacement campaigns during Soviet times, World War II, and the fast-paced industrialization in the 1950s and 1960s mean that what could be defined as “food traditions” or “niche species” do not belong to particular places in Eurasia, but have been resettled across vast territories and reorganized around newly-found state institutions and kinship networks. This also means that many traditions have been continuously altered in their close interface with other practices, as well as by industrialization. In other words, while GIs valorize historical continuity and geographic boundedness, the history of mobility of people and species across Eurasian territories is marked by interruptions, transformations, and hybridity, making its products and hybrid species incompatible with the current GI definitions and their legislative framework.

What this suggests is not only that GIs are protecting only one kind of diversity, but also that such an approach to conservation derives value from geopolitical hierar-

chies where certain regions and their biocultures are marked as valuable and thus to be protected, while other landscapes are rendered irrelevant (Brockington and Duffy 2010; Castree 2008a, 2008b). As a result, the failure to apply GIs in many parts of the world is a material manifestation of the emergence of biocultural diversity's Other, the monotonous, non-diverse territories and gray zones in global diversity's maps. In this sense, looking through the lens of GIs, I argue that the project of biocultural diversity conservation not only marketizes tradition, history, and place, but also rests on the commodification of difference by placing it in geopolitical hierarchies (Bowker 2006).

More broadly, in considering the value of biocultural diversity, it may also be worth remembering that the notion of difference that underlies GIs and biocultural diversity projects is part of the longstanding European intellectual tradition that emphasizes biocultural pluralism, a notion that, as Isaiah Berlin has shown, is wrought with contradictions and disturbing omissions. In his reflection on Herder's work, Berlin (1976) argues that European pluralism is characterized not simply by its recognition of multiplicity, but also by its acknowledgment of and emphasis on the incommensurability of different values, cultures, and societies. Berlin suggests that such an embrace of difference and a preservation of biocultural distinctions in the context of increasing global pressures and cosmopolitanism means that pluralism may also have a negative side, which manifests itself in increasing intolerance, competition, and discrimination. What this means is that the explicit valorization of difference in GIs and biocultural diversity projects is a potentially troubling proposition that calls for new approaches to include and deal with the Other.

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