

Book Reviews

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Reviewer

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Varietals of Capitalism:

A Political Economy of the Changing Wine Industry

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Patrick Comiskey

American Rhône: How Maverick Winemakers Changed

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XABIER ITÇAINA, ANTOINE ROGER, and ANDY SMITH: *Varietals of Capitalism: A Political Economy of the Changing Wine Industry*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2016, 280 pp., ISBN 9781501700439 (hardback), \$45.

Varietals of Capitalism defies simple description. Its theoretical framework, depth of research, and interdisciplinarity would seem to have required Herculean tasks from no fewer than three scholars. Of course, this is not a coincidence. In fewer than 250 pages, Xabier Itçaina, Antoine Roger, and Andy Smith, all affiliated with Sciences Po Bordeaux, have put together a richly complex account of the European Union's (EU's) 2008 regulatory change that, in theory, allowed participants in the European wine trade to compete more successfully in the global wine market. Rooted in the existing literature of economic change, *Varietals of Capitalism* utilizes a diverse range of primary source material, including interviews and documentary evidence, from four key EU wine-producing countries: France, Italy, Romania, and Spain.

The authors take as their starting point the generally agreeable position that industry change can only be understood with an ear and an eye toward politics. Employing the concept of *structured contingency*, an amalgamation of institutional thought, field theory, and multiscale politics, the authors argue that the simple explanations offered by most commentators for the necessity of the 2008 change

(i.e., growers were forced to meet the demands of a new globalized consumer) do not hold up against a deep reading of the relevant source material. More generally, the authors reject an economically or intergovernmentally reductionist view of EU policies and focus instead on the “complex set of contingent political work conducted in the economic, scientific, and bureaucratic fields” (p. 7). Although this final goal may prove too ambitious, *Varietals of Capitalism* also seeks to shed light on the relationship between individual actors, social structures, and institutions that constitute contemporary capitalism outside the wine industry.

Varietals of Capitalism is broken into three parts. Part I explores the existing literature and approaches to change in the wine industry and economies more generally. This first section also spells out the authors’ notion of *structured contingency*, and with it the idea of how actors build, maintain, dismantle, and destroy the very institutions that serve to confine, confound, and restrict them (in other words, socially structured actors).

Part II dials back on theory (although not entirely) and pushes forward into the actual debates that led to the 2008 policy change. Avoiding the simplistic and sophisticated arguments that many in the trade use to explain change, the authors present a dense account of how science and academia (including this very journal) helped conceptualize the production and implementation of a new approach to the EU’s governing of the wine industry. What becomes clear is that the regulatory change of 2008 has a deeper and more complex history than what most readers (myself included) would have assumed. European anxiety of falling behind the New World, in wine and in other sectors, was just one factor in the evolvement from supply-driven to demand-driven EU wine laws.

Part III may feel the most relatable to practitioners involved in the wine trade. Here, the authors break down the successes and failures of the first few years of implementation of the 2008 law. It sought to drastically reduce the EU’s interventionist policies of vine grubbing and distillation subsidies and instead focus on supporting producers and merchants in their attempts to present wine to consumers. These changes, however, do not represent a clear victory for neoliberalism and its supporters. Rather, the authors suggest that “microeconomic support” offered to growers and regions formed the “heart of the reform agenda” (p. 192). This fascinating and convincing point runs counter to what may seem like surface-level neoliberal reforms.

As with most books that attempt to challenge conventions, nitpicky criticisms manifest themselves quite readily. At times, the reader is left feeling as though the authors’ primary goal is not explication of the 2008 law but rather the challenge of putting the notion of *structured contingency* into action. Whereas this reader expected the theory to support the empirical study, I finished wondering whether the empirical study was there to support the theory. Second, although the authors go to great lengths to historicize the 2008 change (and are explicit in doing so), they are prone to simplify other, equally complex historically phenomena, including the creation of the system of *appellations d’origine* (pp. 64–69).

These minor quibbles should not detract from what is otherwise a thoughtful, academically driven piece of research. The book speaks to a broad range of academicians, including economists and political scientists, although it may appeal less to wine-trade participants who do not have an interest in the scholastic side of their livelihoods. Whether the concept of *structured contingency* will have any enduring impact outside the wine trade, or within it, remains to be seen.

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PATRICK COMISKEY: *American Rhône: How Maverick Winemakers Changed the Way Americans Drink*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2016, 352 pp. ISBN: 9780520256668 (hardback), \$34.95.

In an interview with the *Santa Barbara Independent*,¹ Comiskey describes how he set out in 2007 to compose a guide to US Rhône wines and producers. The purpose of the book shifted after he became enthralled by the outlandish histories of the Rhône Rangers, and how they came to make the wines that define them. There is a certain parallel here with how many of the key characters in the book become similarly enthralled by the Rhône varieties, often by unintended and fortuitous means, but then choose to make them their lives' work. The approach taken by the Rangers reinforces the perception of them as mavericks, from ignoring the disdain for the simple idea of imitating French wines in the United States to the illicit importation of cuttings. A sense of the steadfastly individualistic, entrepreneurial psyche lends a conspicuously American flavor to this book and its characters. The power of "one-bottle epiphanies" to infuse people with a singular zeal runs beneath the surface, illustrated by Mat Garretson's dogged pursuit of John Alban. Not knowing he is phoning a modem line serving a weather station in the middle of a vineyard that only has a handset connected intermittently, he phones at all times of day and night for 3 months before his persistence bears fruit; their meeting gives birth to the Hospices du Rhône (p. 223). Similarly, graduate student Gary Eberle (p. 80) decides in 1972 upon tasting a Saint-Julien from Ducru-Beaucaillou that he no longer wishes to pursue a promising career as a geneticist but just wants to drink; it is safe to assume that many others have had similar thoughts after a particularly nice bottle, but few have made the career change stick.

In his opening lines, Comiskey qualifies himself as a writer who fell in love with wine, as opposed to a lifetime oenophile who embraced writing. He has enjoyed success using the writer's toolbox of vocabulary and metaphor to describe what he

¹<http://www.independent.com/news/2017/mar/02/patrick-comiskeys-ode-syrah-and-roussanne-and/>