

THE SOBER REVOLUTION

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*Appellation Wine and the
Transformation of France*

JOSEPH BOHLING

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Cover illustration: “Plaisir de boire, ne dure qu’un moment!”

[“The pleasure of drinking only lasts a moment!”] HCEIA (Haut comité d’étude et d’information sur l’alcoolisme) poster, c. 1955–1960. Courtesy of the National Archives of France, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.

To my family,
for loving me absolutely

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celebrated *dimanche*—those long Sundays of cooking, eating, drinking, and socializing—that give people reason to pause. Such days seem hard to sustain in this century, but I hope that they prevail.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AOC	Appellation of Controlled Origin <i>Appellation d'origine contrôlée</i>
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CGB	General Confederation of Beet Growers <i>Confédération générale des planteurs des betteraves</i>
CGP	General Commissariat of the Plan <i>Commissariat général du Plan</i>
CGVA	General Confederation of Algerian Vine Growers <i>Confédération générale des vignerons algériens</i>
CGVM	General Confederation of Southern Vine Growers <i>Confédération générale des vignerons du Midi</i>
CNAO	National Committee of Appellations of Origin (CNAO) <i>Comité national des appellations d'origine</i>
CNDCA	National Committee for the Defense against Alcoholism <i>Comité national de défense contre l'alcoolisme</i>
CNPFV	National Committee for Wine Promotion <i>Comité national de propagande en faveur du vin</i>

CNVS	National Confederation of Wine and Spirits <i>Confédération nationale des vins et spiriteux</i>
CP	Peasant Confederation <i>Confédération paysanne</i>
EEC	European Economic Community
FAV	Federation of Vine Growing Associations <i>Fédération des Associations viticoles</i>
FNPFC	National Federation of Cider Producers <i>Confédération nationale des producteurs de fruits à cidre</i>
FNSEA	National Federation of Farmers' Unions <i>Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles</i>
GI	Geographical Indication
HCEIA	High Commission for Studies and Information on Alcoholism <i>Haut Comité d'étude et d'information sur l'alcoolisme</i>
IFA	French Institute of Alcohol <i>Institut français de l'alcool</i>
INAO	National Institute of Appellations of Origin <i>Institut national des appellations d'origine</i>
INED	National Institute of Demographic Studies <i>Institut national d'études démographiques</i>
INSEE	National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies <i>Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques</i>
IVCC	Institute of Industrial Wines <i>Institut des vins de consommation courante</i>
IWO	International Wine Office
ONSER	National Organization of Road Safety <i>Organisme national de sécurité routière</i>
SFMAV	French Society of Pro-Wine Doctors <i>Société française des médecins amis du vin</i>
SNBA	National Syndicate of Ambulating Distillers <i>Syndicat national des bouilleurs ambulants</i>
SNBC	National Syndicate of Home Distillers <i>Syndicat national des bouilleurs de cru</i>
UFC	Federal Union of Consumption <i>Union fédérale de la consommation</i>
VDQS	Delimited Wines of Superior Quality <i>Vins délimités de qualité supérieur</i>
VDT	(European) Table Wines <i>Vins de table</i>

VQPRD	(European) Quality Wines Produced in a Determined Region <i>Vins de qualité produits dans des régions déterminées</i>
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

NOTE ON USAGE

Regions and Regional Wine

I follow the scholarly custom of capitalizing the names of wine regions and use lowercase for the wines that originate from these regions. Hence, Burgundy, Bordeaux, and Champagne refer to the regions, whereas burgundy, bordeaux, and champagne refer to wines from these regions.

Metric and American Equivalent

1 hectare = 2.47 acres

1 liter = 0.26 gallons

1 hectoliter = 26.42 gallons

GUIDE TO TERMS

Appellation wine

Also referred to in this book as luxury or “quality” wine. Wine that comes from state-approved grape varieties and vineyards in officially designated wine regions. Appellation wine is place-specific, as opposed to “industrial wine,” which can come from anywhere. Most of the metropolitan policy-makers discussed in this book assumed that appellation wine and quality wine were synonymous, an assumption that reflected and perpetuated class and racial biases against peasant and Algerian producers.

Beet grower

These cultivators often turned their beets into either alcohol or sugar. They were loosely allied with the industrial vine growers in obtaining state subsidies to cope with the problem of overproduction.

Cider producer

Farmers with an orchard, mostly in Brittany and Normandy, who turned their apples into cider. Cider producers joined forces with industrial

vine growers and beet growers in persuading the state to subsidize their surpluses.

Home distiller

Found throughout France, these farmers and gardeners distilled the fruits of their own property into brandy. Although much of their production took place on a small scale, home distillation was also a way for vine growers and cider producers to find outlets for their surpluses. The state allowed 10 liters of tax-free home-distilled brandy per year.

Industrial wine

Also referred to in this book as “ordinary wine,” “table wine,” or *vins de consommation courante*. Wine that came from high-yielding vines produced in the plains of the Languedoc that tended to be acidic and low in alcohol, was often deemed to be of inferior quality, and was blended by merchants with mass-produced, more alcoholic wines from Algeria and Italy. Consumers often preferred the wines that fell under this category, but state officials subordinated these wines as “ordinary” given their links to peasants in mainland France and settlers in French Algeria, two groups that policymakers wished to reform. Unlike appellation wines, which are branded with their place of origin and style of production, industrial wine used a corporate trademark such as Postillon or Préfontaines, not all that different from Coca-Cola.

Merchant

Middlemen or *négociants* who sourced grapes from different areas, usually with the purpose of making cheap industrial wine.

Plonk

English slang that denotes low-quality, standardized, industrial wine.

Technocrat

Otherwise known as an expert. Technocrats are trained in France’s elite institutions and staff the government administration. Although they are often perceived and portrayed to be ideologically and politically neutral, technocrats entered the policymaking process with their own cultural assumptions and political agendas.

Terroir

A fluid term that loosely translates as “a sense of place.” Appellation wines are typically seen as expressing *terroir*, a sense of how and where they are made.

Vine grower

Cultivator of vines, but not necessarily a winemaker. Although in appellation districts many vine growers also made their own wine, the vine growers of industrial wine, particularly in the Languedoc, often could not afford winemaking equipment and thus sold their grapes to merchants who blended them with the more alcoholic wines of Algeria and Italy.

THE SOBER REVOLUTION



Figure 1. Map of major wine and brandy regions in France and French Algeria. Metropolitan policymakers generally did not distinguish among Algerian wine regions; for this reason these regions are not identified on the map.

INTRODUCTION

In 1957, Roland Barthes penned an essay exposing how the French enshrouded wine in myths—it quenched thirst, stimulated the mind, made the timid talkative, cured illness, and provided strength and nourishment—all the while blissfully ignoring the turmoil that arose from wine production.¹ For nearly half a century, France’s wine industry—dominated in large part by two vast regions of single-crop grapevine plantings—had suffered from repeated surplus crises, falling prices, and social strife. In 1907, left-leaning peasant vine growers in the southern Languedoc region had staged one of the largest uprisings since the French Revolution and consequently obtained state subsidies to offset the challenges of overproduction.² Their struggle set the pattern for subsequent wine gluts. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, the Languedoc’s woes were aggravated by the rapid expansion of industrialized viticulture in colonial Algeria, where European settlers had expropriated the land of an indigenous population that was poor, undernourished, and restive.³ French consumers unwittingly supported this state of affairs through their everyday wine-drinking habits.

Barthes's "Wine and Milk," which appeared at a critical juncture in post-1945 France, suggested that seemingly disparate events—war in Algeria, political instability in Paris, and habitual wine drinking—were connected, and for good reason. In 1954, Algerians ignited their war of independence from French rule. Because wine played such a vital role in the settlers' structure of wealth and power, the Algerian independence movement attacked the industry as a symbol of imperial oppression. At the same time in Paris, the Pierre Mendès France government notoriously campaigned against France's high rates of wine-related alcoholism by scaling back production and encouraging the French to drink milk. In a country with deeply held beliefs about the virtues of wine—most French people viewed it as a food, as a national icon, even as an *antidote* to alcoholism—Mendès France's milk drinking was taken as an insult. Such beliefs gave the wine industry democratic legitimacy and helped the Algerian and alcohol lobbies overthrow his government in short order. "Wine and Milk" signaled a new understanding of the problems stemming from France's political and imperial order; it also revealed the drinking mythologies that obstructed reform.

Barthes's observations mirrored a broad movement initiated after World War II to modify French myths about wine, a transformation I call "the sober revolution." During the economic boom known as the Thirty Glorious Years, a period in which agricultural industrialization prevailed, the French wine industry made a surprising transition from an orientation around mass production and consumption in Algeria and the Languedoc to an emphasis on artisanship, luxury, and distinction in metropolitan regions. France had long produced tiny amounts of luxury wine in regions like Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne, but as France integrated into global markets after World War II, industry leaders fought to modernize the sector and expand luxury production in order to remain competitive with the established wine producers among their European neighbors as well as with the rapidly developing wine industries in the Americas. Production quantities stayed relatively consistent throughout this period, but much of the industrial wine was distilled and diverted into non-drinkable products, and luxury wine production and exports increased to compensate for the shrinking domestic market (figure 2). Statistics illustrate the change in wine-drinking

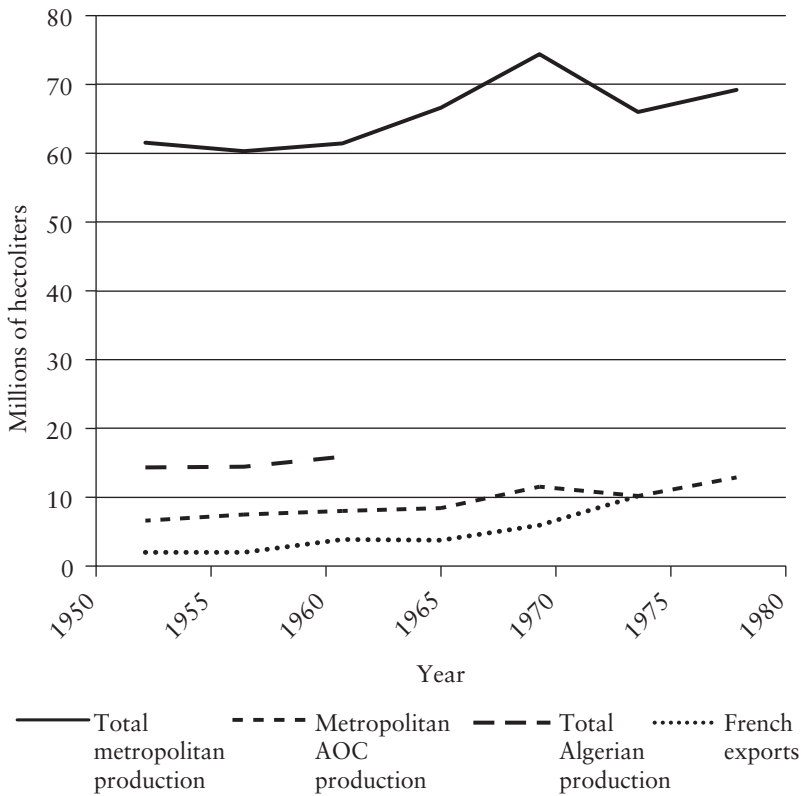


Figure 2. French wine production and exports, 1950–1980. Data from Marcel Lachiver, *Vins, vignes et vignerons: Histoire du vignoble français* (Paris: Fayard, 1988) and Leo A. Loubère, *The Wine Revolution in France: The Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

habits (figure 3).⁴ Total wine consumption per individual over the age of fourteen fell 47 percent over the course of a generation, from 173 liters in 1960 to 90 liters in 1985, a trend that sets France apart from industrialized countries like the United States. Conversely, luxury wine consumption rose from about 13 liters per capita between 1960 and 1964 to nearly 24 liters between 1981 and 1985.⁵ This shift toward luxury wine—which sober revolutionaries defined as produced and regulated in regionally specific places in mainland France—has continued and intensified in our own day.

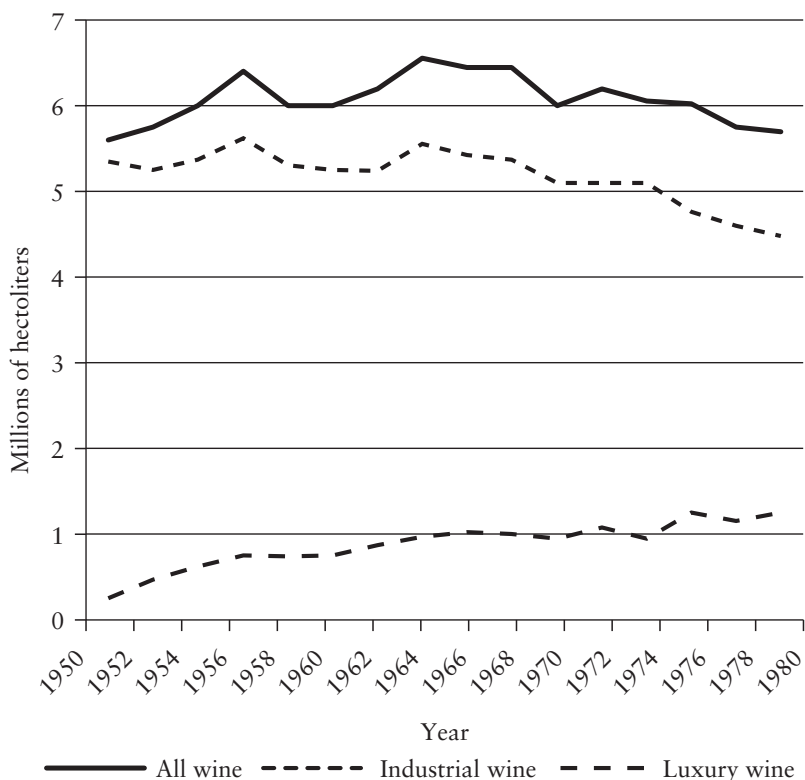


Figure 3. French wine consumption, 1950–1980. Data from Catherine Aubey and Daniel Boulet, “La consommation d’alcool en France régresse et se transforme,” *Économie et statistique* 176 (April 1985).

Scholars have charted the origins of France’s modern luxury wine industry in the first decades of the twentieth century but not its contested and contingent rise from the 1930s into the postwar years.⁶ Explanations for its origins and rise focus almost exclusively on the supply side when, in fact, its consolidation depended as much on the state’s ability to harness and cultivate new tastes among a new middle class that had more disposable income and access to a wider array of French and foreign goods than had previous generations.⁷ The sober revolution and the modernization of the wine industry were two sides of the same “civilizing” project that attempted to engineer new market and social norms. For political reasons

after 1945, most French people gradually altered their perceptions of wine from a food, a “taste of necessity,” into a “taste of luxury.”⁸

The sober revolution took place because different and sometimes antagonistic groups—demographers, doctors, economists, engineers, legal experts, politicians, statisticians, consumer activists, and the dynamic industries of luxury wine, automobiles, oil, insurance, and tourism—made a controversial connection between wine surpluses, on the one hand, and alcoholism and malnutrition, on the other, and saw these related problems as symptomatic of a flawed political and economic system. These sober revolutionaries joined forces in the High Commission for Studies and Information on Alcoholism (HCEIA). Established by Mendès France in November 1954, just after the onset of the Algerian War, the HCEIA resided in the office of the prime minister and claimed to serve the “general interests” of the nation above the particular concerns of any one sector, such as public health, agriculture, or the economy. The HCEIA advocated policies to wean consumers off Algerian and peasant wine and brandy in the name of public health, but its members’ interests ran deeper, into restructuring wine production and the political and imperial order that supported it. In their view, wine surpluses and alcoholism represented problems with the distribution of power in state institutions, the inward orientation of the economy, and the shape and meaning of France as the country decolonized and pursued economic modernization.

Given the political power of the industrial vine growers and the protectionist policies that continued to sustain them well into the post-1945 era, the sober revolutionaries would not have succeeded without important structural changes. In 1958, the war in Algeria brought down the parliamentary-based Fourth Republic (1946–1958); it was replaced by an executive-based Fifth Republic (1958–present), which empowered technocrats to overcome parliamentary obstacles, reform the wine industry, and liberalize the economy.⁹ Then, the decolonization of Algeria in 1962 diminished the amount of Algerian wine on the French market. Finally, the member-states of the European Economic Community (EEC) organized a common wine market in the 1960s, which eventually allowed the sober revolutionaries to mobilize France’s European partner nations against the wine surplus problem in the Languedoc and against French myths about the virtues of daily wine drinking. With the exception of Italy, wine held less economic and cultural value to France’s European partners.