

Warwick Food GRP Conference 2020: 'Food Encounters: A Network Conference'

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Title: European Geographical Indication Labels: Not So Traditional Afterall

Geographical Indication (GI) is an intellectual property law system of protection which dictates that a good can hold a certain name only if it is produced in a defined location. Examples of protected GIs are Champagne, Roquefort, and Cornish Pasties. There are two levels of GI protection, depending on the extent of the link between the production and the location, but both levels protect the use of a certain product name within a distinct geographical area. In this presentation, I will argue that despite the European Union (EU) legal and policy discourse portraying GI labels as indicators of traditional productions, this is a misrepresentation of the current realities. In fact, the GI label as an indicator of tradition is one of various EU claims, around the benefits GI protection, lacking in evidential bases.

At the EU level, GI labels and names are claimed to be an indicator of tradition for consumers. This claim is implied in the relevant EU Regulations but also stated in the regulations' preparatory works and in case law. This suggests that the products are made locally in a traditional and ancient way by small independent farmers. However, this presentation will highlight that, in practice, the production of these GIs is not always quite as it appears. With increasingly automated manufacturing methods and multi-national corporations taking over productions, the humble GI label is not what the EU promises, even when the label appears on products sold at local farmers' markets. For example, it is estimated that 70 per cent of French GI protected cheeses are actually produced industrially.

Consumers today demand a return to authenticity and tradition, and so industrials are capitalising on this. However, are these demands, sought by consumers, still relevant today? After all, it has been argued that, in Europe, the local family farm productions are no longer part of today's reality. From our favourite cheeses whose recipes are changing to Cornish Pasties whose only real link with Cornwall is their place of assembly, some GIs are now far from the ideals of tradition they try to convey, and the reputation built around these products years ago is now being exploited. This is not to say that this lack of tradition is true for all GI productions. Some products may of course still be produced in a very manual and traditional way, as was the case hundreds of years ago. Moreover, this presentation does not assess whether or not modern food production practices and changes in product specificities are necessarily problematic. This presentation simply argues that consumers should not be charged a premium for so-called 'tradition', when some of these products may in fact be manufactured alongside conveyor belts for plastic-wrapped ready-meals. If Geographical Indications are to be protected, the discourses and rationales for their protection need to be supported by the appropriate evidential bases.