

# Introduction

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## Food and quality

Food in late modern societies is marked by controversy. It was never a matter of indifference, of course, in other times and places. Yet, with the food supply secured in the western world against the seasons, pestilence and drought, with most foods wholesome, and mostly available at affordable prices, its significance as a topic of political argument must appear somewhat surprising. Subject to enormous scrutiny – in the media, through political disputation and by cultural evaluation, as well as in everyday conversation – it is a field of contrary opinions.

The unifying theme of this book is a highly contentious issue, that of the use of the intriguing concept of *quality*. ‘Quality’ is one of those words with unfailingly positive connotations. True, it may be prefixed by terms like ‘poor’, ‘bad’ or ‘inferior’, but in the absence of such qualification the intimation is wholly positive. To say that something ‘has quality’ is almost always to recommend it. As an abstract noun the capacity of ‘quality’ for recommendation is blanket, yet implicitly there is always contained a reference to some particular attribute or attributes. A ‘quality steak’ is one which is, let us say, tasty, tender, or both. Having the quality ‘fresh’ precludes the quality frozen, but says nothing about the qualities of, for example, safeness or toxicity, or whether it is factory-made or home-made. Most foodstuffs have several relevant quality attributes.

In many contexts there is advantage to be had, for food producers or advocates, in concentrating attention on just one attribute, or, in some instances – if one can make the argument stick – on none at all. One example discussed in the book is the notion of ‘quality chains’, a label that small farmers have deployed as part of a strategy to sell products with comparatively high value-added, but one which is substantively empty without specification of the attributes to which reference is being made. Being locally produced, from an identifiable source and involving face-to-face contact between producer and retailer are the presumed relevant attributes. Acceptance of the claim entails acquiescing in the judgement that such produce is in some way better than produce accessed in other ways. But the making of that judgment is potentially

obscured, and the claim might easily be accepted without reflection. In other words, the term 'quality' is one which enmeshes tightly, though not inextricably, the empirical and the normative: it refers to particular attributes (qualities) of a product and at the same time makes a presumptive judgement that is positive. This is precisely the type of concept that social scientists must handle with care. One danger is actually accepting uncritically the normative claim. Another is underestimating the importance of examining the means by which such claims are generated, established and defended. It is this second task which provides the central connecting theme of this book.

Because it is about judgement in contexts where there is no final and definitive arbiter of the most relevant quality or the absolute standard whereby better or worse can be identified, the concept of quality performs some of the functions – and poses some of the problems – associated with *taste*, a concept which has received a great deal of attention over the past 250 years. Indeed, several of the chapters in the book focus directly on taste. Debates about taste are about standards of judgement, mostly of an aesthetic nature, and concern ways in which to validate a claim that one thing is more worthy or more beautiful than another. The advent of postmodernism made answering that question even more difficult than it had been, by challenging the basis of an established cultural hierarchy, whereby, as Bourdieu might put it, the preferences of the powerful were canonised as good taste. Certainly it is no longer easy to accept older conceptions of good taste which, Gronow (1997) reminds us, was portrayed as ineffable, indivisible, unquestionable, embodied by persons who somehow inherited impeccable judgement and whose judgements were therefore not open to dissection into component parts which might be scrutinised forensically and held up to challenge. Instead, to look more closely for the grounds on which aesthetic judgements are routinely made suggests a route forward.

Quality is, arguably, a more useful term than taste because it is much easier to see that judging X to be of good quality refers to one or, usually, more *qualities* in which X excels. Moreover those qualities are not just aesthetic, for the term also applies to effective social performances of several kinds, including fitness for purpose. When a producer refers to the quality of a product, it is as likely that the reference is to one 'well-made' or functionally appropriate as it is to its taste. In relation to food, this draws our attention to the various qualities, or dimensions of quality, which may be the basis of recommendation. We can easily recognise that any item may be good with respect to one quality and bad with respect to another. Foods which are tasty but unhealthful provide a common example. It is also easy to be alert to the fact that a producer is likely to draw the public's attention to the first property, while the nutritionist will highlight the second. Public health and economic competitiveness thus partly revolve around persuading people to prioritise one quality over another. That still, however, leaves open the difficulty of determining whether in respect of any one quality an item is excellent, mediocre or poor. Who shall say? What criteria shall we use?

Chapters in the book offer various answers to these questions, answers dependent partly on theoretical and disciplinary traditions, partly on the techniques of investigation selected.

It is the normative, or evaluative, sense of the term 'quality' that inspires popular and public debate. Its increasing use might be understood in terms of crises of confidence in the food supply. The term has come to refer to foods, or processes of production and distribution of foods, which operate beyond or alongside of the industrialised system of large-scale production, preparation through manufacturing, and distribution through large supermarket chains. The term 'quality chain' implicitly attributes high quality to locally produced and marketed food, a strategy of small producers according to Marsden (chapter 6). In this context the idea of quality plays mostly on a contrast with the orientations of the mainstream industrialised food system towards low cost, convenience, consistency, reliability and predictability. Yet a moment's reflection suggests that these, too, are 'qualities', and indeed ones with positive valence. Quality is, thus, to be associated not only with an authenticifiable place of origin, knowable and traceable sources of supply, and exceptional flavour and texture, but with guarantees regarding safety, nutritiousness and accessibility. It might be more appropriate, unless we can demonstrate that some qualities are more valuable than others, to say simply that the industrial food chain is directed towards different aspects of quality. Certainly, at the outset, we should be cautious lest we slip unawares between the descriptive and the normative registers of the concept, thereby implying that those things not labelled of quality are inferior or defective.

The crisis of confidence in the food industries of Europe is remarkable. The population of western Europe is probably better fed now than ever before: the supply chain is reliable, secure and capable of furnishing widely diverse foodstuffs in support of many different diets and culinary preferences. Yet there is widespread popular mistrust of the food supply which finds expression most obviously over matters of safety, where BSE, foot and mouth disease, chemical contamination, E-coli, dioxins, Salmonella, etc., pose direct threats to human health. This might imply that we should think of food as a very special case of consumption because of the obvious threat to health arising either from being without food or from food being adulterated. One can starve or be poisoned. But this in no measure accounts for the level of concern shown regarding food provision. Arguably the field of food provision has become one of the most controversial in the political arena and at the level of everyday life. But that this can be attributed primarily to crises and scandals regarding safety is a moot point. Though several papers attribute considerable importance to highly publicised episodes like BSE, none presumes that this is a sufficient basis for the current attention to food. For many other changes in the organisation of the food system have occurred independently. Some are to be found in the upper reaches of the food supply chain, a result of globalisation of sourcing, transformation in the agro-food industry, concentration of food manufacturers and distributors, and the like.

Others appear as paradoxes of behaviour in everyday life. People in Britain watch many more cookery programmes and buy more cookery books, but they cook less than do their fellow Europeans. They have access to a better regulated and much more varied supply of food, yet are more likely to suffer from food disorders like obesity and anorexia, and to adopt highly specialised diets. And, important to this book, they are prepared to engage in public and collective action to express their discontent with existing provision and to advocate alternative modes of food supply. In the latter regard, we can see changed behaviour on the part of ordinary people: perhaps the emergence of a degree of critical reflexivity on the part of many citizens, from mothers to gourmets; new forms of informal collective organisation claiming to act in the interests of the consumer (not just the consumer associations, but also the Slow Food and Fair Trade movements, etc.). A vocal minority devotes considerable energy to bringing to light the deficiencies of the agencies involved farther up in the food chain, making their voice heard in political circles and media debates, and changing their personal eating habits and diets. Food is not a matter of indifference to the public. People are concerned about food – though that concern is not necessarily expressed in the stereotypical economics model of the consumer – and are constantly involved in evaluating it.

As the chapters of the book indicate, there are many dimensions of concern besides that of safety. The predicted epidemic of obesity means that the consequences for nutrition and health of eating currently available food are deeply problematical. Other people worry about the culinary and aesthetic value of foodstuffs. And there are movements for animal welfare which raise ethical questions about the propriety of the practices of major actors in the food chain. Then there is the environmental damage that modern large-scale farming techniques bring. All these exist on top of more mainstream concerns with the price of food, with the level of profit and the degree of oligopoly in the various markets which constitute the food chain. Food has many qualities which attract public attention.

The issue of food quality is widely construed as closely involving the consumer. The problem that has arisen from food crises is described as the decline of consumer trust or confidence. And it is at the points of transfer to and use by consumers that the issue of quality actually bites. New strategies for developing trust, from European Commission (EC) policies designed to increase the openness and transparency of the food chain to attempts to reduce the distance and number of steps between farm and fork – described in chapter 6 as the spread of short supply chains – apparently give great priority to consumers' concerns and interests. (The extent to which this is a matter more of rhetoric than of substance is, of course, much debated.) Thus the analysis of quality cannot be far separated from the analyses of consumers and consumption. Indeed, each chapter of the book makes extensive reference to consumption, conceived either as purchase or use of commodities. Several of the authors take it almost for granted that understanding food

preferences is just a particular case of the more general question ‘How do people come to select what to consume?’ Answering that question has, however, proved notoriously difficult. The approaches of such disciplines as psychology, economics and sociology have traditionally been very different (see Miller 1995). And the more the consumer becomes a focus of political discourse, the greater the apparent confusion.

Arguably western Europe has seen recently a blurring of the boundaries between politics and shopping. The distinction between exit and voice as alternative strategies for the discontented (Hirschman 1982) used to be applied without hesitation to contrast two different circumstances, between withdrawing one’s custom in a market relationship (exit) and vocally expressing one’s opposition in a political relationship (voice). That separation is now much harder to achieve. There are two opposing views of how demands might be made for improvements in particular quality dimensions. First, some activists and analysts think that there is a role for highly active consumers to make personal everyday purchasing decisions which would express political convictions. The attempts to persuade people to become ‘green consumers’ was based on just such a model. On the other hand, rather than trying to politicise purchasing decisions, there are attempts to make political action more like the process of purchasing. In addressing citizens, political parties and governments have tried to draw them into politics as if they were consumers. Burgess (2001) makes a good case that governments are increasingly speaking as representative of ‘the consumer’ – rather than the nation or its social classes – a tendency which addresses citizens as individuals rather than as members of social groups and categories. They are also increasingly designing policies to model public service delivery on market discipline. Thus the boundary between public and private becomes less clear.

In the understanding of ‘the consumer’ that lies at the core of official recognition and policy formulation in this field there is an associated problem. The dominant view of consumer freedom and consumers’ interest as the right to purchase whatever they please in a free market, a view overwhelmingly dominant in the USA (Cohen 2000; Cross 2000) and increasingly so in Europe, is predicated on the tenets of orthodox neo-classical economics. Consumption is seen as a realm of individual autonomy, and one where it is to be expected that rational individuals will act in accordance with what they take to be their personal self-interest. Consumption involves disparate individuals making decisions in the light of their personal preferences. But while this may be a model of action necessary for purposes of neo-classical macro-economic analysis, it is a very strange representation of what most people do most of the time when going to market. That this model is at all plausible seems to be a matter of temporal and spatial circumstances of contemporary western economies. There are other ways of thinking about consumption.

For instance, historians have recently been making a major contribution to the understanding of the construction of the consumer (for a review see Trentmann forthcoming). They show the elimination of alternative ways to

understand the role of consumers and how that has made for a particular form of contemporary consumer politics. Cohen (2000: 204) makes a rather ungainly distinction, but one which is very effective, between citizen-consumers and customer-consumers: the former are

consumers who take on the political responsibility we usually associate with citizens to consider the general good of the nation through their consumption, and the latter . . . consumers who seek primarily to maximise their personal economic interests in the market place.

The move in the mid-1980s to appeal to the consumer in public service delivery is the latest stage in the shift from consumption as a citizenship issue to one of mere customer concern.

The dominant understanding of consumer behaviour in both the economic sphere and in political circles rests on presuppositions which all our authors contest in one way or another. It follows that the chapters in this book also demonstrate little sympathy with the principal mode of understanding food crises. Both nation states and the EC operate on the assumption that restoring trust in food is a matter of altering popular perceptions of risk, and of setting up organisations and procedures to manage risk. This is best achieved by greater openness and transparency along the food chain which will, through devices like labelling, provide consumers with sufficient information on the basis of which they feel confident to exercise informed personal choice. This conclusion is not one arrived at in the chapters of this book, largely because it offers an inadequate understanding of the processes of consumption.

This suggests that we might usefully deploy theories of consumption to clarify more of the contentious issues surrounding food, particularly since, by the admission of most authorities, the theoretical basis of the social science of food consumption is comparatively weak (e.g. Mennell et al. 1992; Wood 1995; Warde 1997). Reviews of theoretical approaches have contrasted developmental, structuralist and functionalist accounts (Mennell et al. 1992). Others have identified cultural and systems approaches, with, for instance, Atkins and Bowler (2001) distinguishing within systems approaches between theories of the commodity chain, of networks and of systems of provision. Such contrasts between theories have been made at only the very highest levels of abstraction, and even then they are not highly distinct. Arguably, middle-range theoretical concepts, those that can be applied in the analysis of particular episodes or with respect to particular products or practices, are the more useful. This volume makes some progress by taking theoretically contrasting approaches and applying them to explain particular aspects of behaviour and institutions. The chapters start from a desire to explore new applications of established theories or to adapt theoretical approaches in order to illuminate behaviour in the field of food. They focus particularly on social processes at the downstream end of the food chain, processes of distribution and consumption. This reflects our conviction that these are stages in the food chain which are insufficiently examined. It is perhaps particularly

the processes mediating the space between market demand and final consumption which require most attention (see Harvey et al. 2001).

We are interested in agents, their strategies and the associated social processes through which reputations of things good to eat are constructed and justified. Such a concern directs attention to advocacy of different and often competing systems for the delivery of food (organics or biotech, for instance), to new procedures for determining and guaranteeing food standards, to the variety of objectives involved in the selection of foods (safety, taste, identity) and to processes of the social judgement of taste. The determination of what is 'good' food involves, *inter alia*, state regulation, pressure from consumer movements, popular and media discourses, promotional campaigns by producers and tourist boards, the social practices of households and the creation of new markets for food products. The very breadth of the processes and the institutions involved suggests the possibility of applying many different theories and analytical approaches, and our authors use variously conventions theory, social movement theory, ethnomethodology, social worlds theory, regulation theory, cultural sociology and anthropology, actor-network theory, as well as the more established developmental, structural and systems theories. There is an equally diverse range of distinct qualities that form the basis for contributions in this book, with attention drawn to economic, social, aesthetic, symbolic, biological, religious, geographical and technological attributes.

### **The themes**

The chapters are ordered to best display their collective theoretical and conceptual contributions. Genevieve Teil and Antoine Hennion set the scene in the first part of their chapter with a brief review of existing disciplinary approaches to understanding judgements about taste. Their empirical examples concern music and wine, raising thus a major and intriguing question about whether there is anything unique or special about food when it comes to developing a general theory of taste. They contest the applicability of the understandings which various scientific disciplines (psychology, sociology, biology, engineering) bring to the analysis of taste. All, with their established approaches to the issue of taste, are partial and limited, their analytic foci serving to obscure the reality of taste.

Their own account of taste draws on the ethnomethodological perspective. Ethnomethodology – a tradition of analysis which was at its height in the 1970s and 1980s – defined itself initially primarily in opposition to the dominant version of sociology of the 1960s, the normative functionalism associated with Talcott Parsons. It insisted on recognising that people were highly skilled, knowledgeable, reflexive agents who made and reproduced the social world to which they belonged in the performances of their ordinary practices. People did not simply learn and abide by the rules of behaviour associated with particular social roles, but improvised continually as

they sought to fit their conduct to the specific situations in which they encountered other actors. Among the other positions adopted by ethnomethodologists was a strong opposition to positivistic approaches to social science, both to the search for laws and probabilities, and to attempts to analyse social conduct from a vantage point outside of the experience and understanding of ordinary competent actors. The point rather was to identify the theoretical understandings of the actors; there was no theory beyond that already accessible to actors.

For Hennion and Teil, taste is the product of performing the activity of tasting. That is a complex activity which involves individual cognisant subjects, operating in social collectivities, using mechanical devices and processed through the body. They present these four elements as an heuristic device for describing how people with a level of interest in wine and music undertake the process of making judgements about taste. Such people they call 'amateurs', to distinguish them from experts in the various competing scientific disciplines who seek to pronounce on the sources and standards of taste. The competences of amateurs range from passing interest to connoisseurship. Other sociologists might describe such people as 'enthusiasts' or participants in a social world.

The result is a strong reminder of the foibles and selectivity of academic disciplines, registering less a call for inter-disciplinarity than for a return to careful description of how people go about their daily lives, thereby avoiding the necessity of abstracting partially from their practices or subjecting people to a puzzled condescension, or rather the condescension associated with imagining that people do not themselves know the real basis of their actions and their judgements (and that the academic who knows better can therefore inform them). It is indeed a major point of their argument that in the course of reflecting on music or wine, aficionados do indeed draw on discourses which are very similar to those formalised in academic analyses, but they move relatively freely between them and see no purpose in trying to engage with any one of them consistently or systematically. In such a view taste becomes a consequence of the practical performance of tasting, and that taste, or what tastes good, is not in any sense given or static. Rather taste is constantly disputed among amateurs, who are obliged to consider the views of others in the community, change their minds, develop their competences, talk about the activity and justify their judgements. The impression is, then, one of considerable uncertainty, much movement and perpetual learning and clarification. Judgements about quality come in the course of performances in particular contexts, and thus appear constantly in flux, constantly in the making.

Chapter 2, by Jukka Gronow, takes a different line, analysing how aggregates of people who do not necessarily interact with one another come to share opinions and valuations. The approach focuses on the social processes that connect them together to account for the existence of groups with shared understandings which provide the foundation for a determinate

shared appreciation of the quality of foods. He seeks the social foundations for the existence of associations of tasters (the starting point of Teil and Henning) and the consequences for establishing the judgements that arise from their mode of organisation. To do this, Gronow explores in a programmatic way the application of another tradition of social theory to judgements about food quality. Written as a sympathetic critique of Schulze's 1992 book *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*, Gronow employs the insights of the social worlds approach espoused by the symbolic interactionist tradition in sociology to extend and remedy the apparent defects of Schulze's approach.

Schulze stresses the importance of personal inner experience in contemporary consumption, apparently making taste increasingly individualised, taste being something inseparable from personal satisfaction. The only acknowledged grounds for evaluating the quality of experience are subjective and there is no external or objective criteria for determining whether one should be satisfied. Paradoxically, however, the effect is not to encourage highly individualised behaviour but to increase conformity. With no external criteria for attributing value, both producers and consumers tend to prefer that with which they are familiar and which others around them appreciate. Social approval becomes the main guarantee of acceptable taste and appropriate choices. The consequence, according to Schulze, is a much underestimated conservatism in terms of consumption and taste. Gronow, though sympathetic to the view that most consumption is routine and conventional, finds Schulze's argument inadequate in two main respects. First, it is unable to explain shifts in taste, or purchasing, which are at times radical. Second, it denies any degree of objectivity in determining that some items, products or services are better than others. He contends that theorems adopted from social worlds theory can provide answers to these problems.

The social worlds perspective draws on the ideas of Georg Simmel and his observation that the modern world can be conceptualised as a great number of social circles that overlap only partially. Modern individuals are members of many such circles, and each has its own distinctive etiquettes, rules and standards of value. A social world, by analogy, is one with its own distinctive conventions, created over time by its most committed members. The prototypical example of a social world is a voluntary association of people devoted to a particular recreational activity. Such social worlds are informally constituted, though with the passage of time they are likely to become more regularised in their activities and, indeed, formally organised, as with, for example, sports clubs or dining societies. Social worlds are populated by persons with different levels of commitment, with 'enthusiasts' the most central of their insiders and supported by 'regulars' who show loyalty to the activity and the established manner in which it is conducted. The activity may sometimes be visited by 'tourists' who like to browse, without commitment, but who offer some support. Inevitably there is a fourth class of person, 'strangers', who know and care nothing about a

given social world, but whose existence is necessary to the insiders' recognition of their own distinctiveness.

Gronow draws from this a sense that there are groups of people particularly likely to welcome innovative products: enthusiasts for whom the activity is central are particularly likely to experiment with new and different items. Moreover, a social world is one with an established set of – essentially aesthetic – conventions and standards, which, though subject to alteration, make it likely that members of that social world will agree on which products and which performances are to be most valued. This sense of what Gronow refers to as '(semi-)objective' criteria of judgement corresponds to ordinary discussion about products, where there are groups of people who will agree entirely about the superiority of one car over another, one wine over another, one foodstuff over another. The reality of this is attested to partly by the fact that producers constantly appeal to such shared understandings in their advertising and sales' campaigns. At least temporarily and locally, though the actual scale and scope of such shared judgement may be much greater, there are shared standards of excellence. Gronow thus is able to reconcile two apparently contradictory claims:

that modern consumers make choices on their own, often free from both physical and social constraints, following their personal wishes and whims and, nevertheless, that there are some (semi-)objective, aesthetic schemes, codes or guidelines of taste which help to evaluate and to choose the various objects of consumption. (p. 45)

Applying these concepts to taste in foods Gronow prescribes some lines of investigation – of products, of tools, of literatures, of cuisines – that would reveal the existence of such social worlds in respect of cooking and eating. What is 'good' or 'bad' food is determined within social worlds, of which the most influential are those offering competing accounts of authentic cuisine and those concerned with diets addressed to maintaining health and fitness.

Just as Gronow seeks to develop a particular sociological tradition, Allaire in chapter 3 takes to task economists' approaches to quality and demand with a view to providing a more adequate and persuasive account. Economics has been notoriously unconcerned about accounting for the origin and basis of taste, or preferences, by opting to consider them analytically as given and assumed. But Allaire demonstrates how quality has been a central concern in mainstream economic views of market functioning, reminding us that in speaking of food quality in contemporary societies we are essentially talking about food commodities (products and services) traded in markets. By exposing the weaknesses of mainstream economists' approaches to quality, and in particular, their limited understandings of quality as an aspect of market knowledge, Allaire develops a counter-position that draws substantially on actor-network theory, especially that of Callon, convention theory and evolutionary economics. In so doing, he views quality as the outcome of a 'process of qualification' that amounts to the development of 'cognitive

paradigms' shared by networks of products (or 'product networks'), all the main actors of a food provision system, including consumers, and various intermediaries between provisioners and consumers, including amateurs and connoisseurs.

Economists' notions of perfect markets are immediately faced with a dilemma about quality that several different approaches have attempted to resolve. For a good to be a tradable good, a certain homogeneity, measurability and comparability are assumed, and this places quality and quality differentiation at the heart of market operations, otherwise price signals are difficult to link analytically to commodity properties. Establishing norms of measurement, with transparent information, is seen as essential to the rational behaviours of optimising consumers. In this respect, for example, labels which list all the ingredients provide perfect information – assuming that the same list is adhered to by all those providing equivalent homogeneous products at different prices to the market. Quality differentiation, including semiotic and presentational differentiation, however, immediately creates heterogeneity and monopoly market conditions, where informational comparability becomes problematical. This becomes even more so in normative technology approaches, where consumers are faced with a 'make or buy' decision for food services – cooking, presentation, delivery, and so on (Becker 1965; Stigler and Becker 1977).

These approaches share the assumption that self-provisioning and commodity provisioning are comparable under some norms of quality measurement. Allaire argues that these accounts have become more problematical as heterogeneity and globalisation of food markets have increased, and as quality itself has become subject to competing and incompatible norms. Some notions, such as ethical or ecological food, are difficult to place in the same quality space as those that refer to inherent properties of food ingredients. The general thrust of the argument is that the problem of quality cannot be reduced to an information gap between producers and consumers, or between labels and products, which *could* be filled by more or better information.

Another approach of economists has seen reputation – or knowledge and trust of the producer of a good – as a substitute for objective information, so successfully enabling rational, if sub-optimal, market transactions. 'Credence goods' are ubiquitous in food markets – whether in certification of organic, or fair trade goods, or in branding by manufacturers and retailers. But Allaire notes that credence, as a form of market belief, is also fallible, and therefore credence cannot become a viable substitute for information. Once more, heterogeneity and globalisation easily undermine credence, and Allaire gives the example of how the best Bordeaux wines have had to abandon the Bordeaux name as Bordeaux was increasingly mass produced for global markets. Heterogeneity from alternative credence systems – say, concerning the healthfulness of food – also indicates a lack of common frames of reference implied by orthodox economic theory.

The common weakness of these theories – and the real issues they raise for markets for quality – is their impoverished view of knowledge, and this is addressed by Allaire in his development of a view of emergent, relatively stabilised, cognitive paradigms, shared by networks of actors from farm to fork, in which particular products are produced and consumed. But those paradigms are emergent, historical and transitory, involving a process of qualification – or quality making–knowing – shared by a given provisioning–consuming system.

Allaire and Wolf (2004) identify two main contemporary cognitive paradigms, locked in conflict, and producing many ‘quality hybrids’. The one follows the logic of decomposition, a kind of Taylorisation of food production and consumption, where each input to food production and consumption is seen as an object of innovation. The other follows the logic of identity, a holistic view of quality that embraces all dimensions of food, aesthetics, ethics, sociality, purity, naturalness, and so on. Allaire introduces this approach into the framework of an evolutionary theory of knowledge and presents quality as cognitive coordination in a product network.

These three theoretically oriented contributions successfully problematise the concept of quality as explicitly or implicitly analysed in economics and sociology, each offering a distinctive new position developed from the application and extension of an existing approach (the use of an ethnomethodology perspective by Teil and Hennion) or by seeking a synthetic development of previously discrete approaches (as with Gronow and Allaire).

In the second half of the book attention turns to a closer examination of the regulation of quality, both formal and informal. It begins with chapter 4, by Florence Bergeaud-Blackler, which shows how complex, and also how almost whimsical, are the social processes involved in convincing people that a product about to be purchased has a particular desired attribute. While all the chapters problematise the notion of quality, none is more intriguing than this. She examines the processes whereby meat comes to be purchased as *halal* by France’s Muslim communities from the Magreb. Consumer identification and acceptance of particular items as *halal* is a function of religious identification. However, the doctrinal foundations of proper behaviour in observance are indeterminate, there being several competing interpretations; religious authorities are not involved, and there is no certification process. Indeed the religious rules governing eating are more ambivalent than are the informal regulations which have emerged regarding the cultural and commercial practices surrounding the marketing of *halal* meat. The procedures which result in the recognition of meat as *halal* are even more surprising. The slaughtering process is increasingly the same as that for meats of other provenance. It is the fact that it is sold by Muslims, and butchered and displayed at the retail stage in ways reminiscent of those practised in Morocco, which qualifies the meat to *halal* status. Thus *halal* meat displays a symbolic significance often attributed to food – to emphasise belongingness to one ethnic group and resistance to incorporation into another – and it does this

irrespective of the production process. Bergeaud-Blackler describes the factors which have influenced the formation of the current system, among which was the adoption of a domestic convention brought to France by wives who, in anticipation of new legislation governing immigration, in the 1970s followed their husbands in substantial numbers. Thus ethnic identification, commercial competition, religious ambivalence and state regulation combine to create the quality halal which is recognised, endorsed and valued socially. Yet, as Bergeaud-Blackler emphasises, there are neither formal regulations nor any aspect of the process of production which distinguish halal from non-halal meat.

Bergeaud-Blackler's study throws light on a number of issues that are germane to an understanding of the symbolic aspects of food, as well as presenting an interesting case of what it means for a food item to have a particular quality. Among the features highlighted is the apparent arbitrariness of the cultural imperative – the indirect connection between religious doctrine and lay practice, the invention of a set of procedures in France that would be unnecessary back in the Maghreb and the adaptation of mores to ways of life in a bureaucratic and industrialised society. Bergeaud-Blackler also underlines the extent to which quality is the outcome of a process of qualification: halal meat is given its special identifying quality as a result of the development and application of collective procedures of manipulation of symbols and cultural recognition. In this instance, the consumers played a particularly important role, both in creating a demand for a special product and, at the same time, becoming coopted into meat purchasing behaviours which result in them being restricted to a limited number of suppliers. Equally important in this were the social demographic determinations which resulted in wives of immigrants who, arriving in substantial numbers at a particular period, recognised in the atmosphere of the halal butcher's shop's comforting cultural signs of home. So, if one wanted a story to indicate that producers have limited control on their own to define the qualities of their products, this is one. It is from the relations between producers, retailers and customers that products come to have their acknowledged properties. Social trends, social groups and social movements have an irreducible and independent contribution to make to the definition of a quality product.

While Bergeaud-Blackler teases out the tangle of informal and local bases for the ascription of quality, David Barling, in chapter 5, attends to formal modes of regulation. He looks in detail at contemporary institutional and organisational change in the UK and the EC. Barling makes clear that food issues are politically very important, both nationally and in the EC, and he examines recent developments in the formal arrangements and regulatory frameworks for ensuring food quality. Once again, the aspect of food quality featured proves to be a function of the type of social actor charged with discerning or guaranteeing quality. In this instance it is departments of state and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). He gives an account of the development of institutional frameworks, especially of NGOs and governmental

organisations, for dealing with problems of food and agriculture in the 1990s. His is a description of rapidly changing organisational arrangements for the management of the food chain, particularly with regard to safety in the face of a perceived loss of trust in food.

Barling's institutional approach stresses the path dependent features of development, which complements and provides a backcloth to his analysis of representation of interests and the distribution of power. The British experience is presented through his story of the constitution of the Food Standards Agency, a body whose priorities are seen as protecting public health and reassuring the consumer.

In an evaluation of the success of recent policy, he highlights the problems associated with the distribution of the many and diverse responsibilities arising out of the complexity of the food chain. Problems of coordination – within countries, between countries and the EU – are considerable, the different arrangements made being of some importance in determining outcomes. Among the important factors necessitating division of responsibility is the extension of mixed public and private forms of governance.

Despite the differing priorities among agents in the chain, there is a degree of consensus at governmental level on the importance of safety, as opposed to other qualities. In response to crises, organisational reform, directed towards better risk assessment and management, the re-legitimisation of science, and transparency and openness, are the principal themes of an official discourse in which protection of the interests of the consumer is central to the rhetoric of legitimacy. Policies are, though, set within the parameters of the liberalisation of World Trade Organisation regulations, are conciliatory to industry, and have a narrow and particular view of the consumer presumed to be concerned with prices, hygiene aspects of safety and choice. Labelling and traceability, methods of giving information to consumers, are the principal solutions. Other issues, like nutrition, environment and animal welfare, about which sections of the public clearly have concerns, are much less salient.

Regulation implies exercise of power and, most often, the involvement of authoritative political direction in the setting up and operation of regulatory instruments. Regulation is also a spur for contestation. In contemporary Europe, the fusion of regulation and mobilisation is part of an apparent resituating of food in the economy, culture and politics. The third section of the book is concerned with reactions against the dominant tendencies of the industrial system.

Terry Marsden, in chapter 6, considers a form of challenge, orchestrated primarily by groups of agricultural producers, to the conventional industrial food system. He considers those organisations, essentially small operators, who use the claim to quality as a tool of economic competitiveness. These are businesses engaged in what he calls 'short food supply chains' (SFSCs), those characterised by reduced physical or symbolic distance between producer and consumer. SFSCs include farm gate sales and box schemes, farmers' markets

and cooperatives, but also procedures to indicate product origins. These forms of alternative supply typically lay claim to quality either in terms of artisanal specialisation or ecological purity. The claim to quality is generally the basis of a strategy for selling at premium prices comparatively small quantities of particular types of produce which are locally sourced and identified. The chapter offers a typology of SFSCs and examines their distribution through different countries in Europe.

On the basis of an exploratory research project, Marsden debates the long-term future of this alternative system. He explores the dynamics of the conflict and competition between two supply chains, noting the central importance of state policy and regulation in shaping the outcome. He suggests that both protection of small farming businesses and rural development would be better served if the State intervened to support SFSCs, for indeed this is a political matter. In the particular context, in Wales, and also in the rest of the UK, the prices paid by big retailers to primary producers are subjected to much comment, as is the decline of the small rural farming sector and the extent to which the retail food sector is competitive. He argues that the State is less than willing to intervene, partly because of its established relationship with corporate organisations in the food sector. He also notes that the corporate retailers have themselves quickly re-orientated themselves towards this new thrust, themselves using the term ‘quality’ – and the same suppliers – which serves to maintain their existing power in the marketplace.

The chapter thus emphasises the importance of economic competition and state regulation in the production and legitimation of quality food. Marsden’s account is firmly rooted in an analysis of the distribution of power and control across the system of production and distribution. He shows that it is the operation of competition and power which determines what is accepted as ‘quality’. He charts the jostling for position among competitors in the various stages of the food chain, and the process whereby the power of different agents in that chain is restructured over time. The actors in SFSCs, consumers included, are part of a struggle against the existing distribution of power in the food supply system, a resistance mobilised behind the slogan ‘quality’. Attention to quality as provenance of provision becomes a means to advocate the redistribution of economic value from dominant retailers to small primary producers and processors.

In chapter 7, Murdoch and Miele also examine the emergence of alternatives to the industrial food system. They see the emerging alternatives as an artisanal reaction to an industrial system based on high output and standardisation. The alternatives convey different notions of quality, those which reject dominant economic conventions and replace them with, in particular, aesthetic notions. Here, they make good use of conventions theory to identify incommensurate notions of quality. They make use also of Michel Callon’s distinction which posits that foods, like all other products, pass through a series of ‘qualification processes’ which amalgamate their intrinsic properties

and extrinsic attributes, arising from social judgements, in giving items their identity. Such processes result in the quality of an item being essentially fluid, able to be altered through social intervention. Qualification comes from struggles entered into through the economic process by which firms emphasise the positive differentiating features of their own products – though Murdoch and Miele argue that this is difficult because the foods produced in the industrial system are highly uniform.

However, the industrial system, as a result of crises and scandals, has come under increasingly widespread suspicion. Some people have begun to evaluate critically what lies behind the veneer of advertised products. They now increasingly dissociate themselves from industrial products, a detachment achieved through a reflexivity which allows them to calculate and evaluate the associated risks. Subsequently, they find alternative bases for confidence, which they discover in reconnection with nature and tradition. The consequence of crises is thus new assessments and judgements which constitute a ‘requalification’ of foods.

Murdoch and Miele argue that new social movements have played a key role in this process, and demonstrate the point by looking at three contemporary mobilisations. The Slow Food Movement seeks to resituate eating in cultural and traditional contexts, presenting food consumption as an aesthetic activity. The Soil Association of the UK has changed from a scientific body to an advocate of organic and local foods. The Fair Trade Movement has re-emphasised the social impact of the economics of farming, thereby bringing to attention the tendency of globalisation to dissociate totally producers from consumers. These three movements, then, exhibit different perceptions and concerns with regard to quality. Yet, Murdoch and Miele argue, taken together they ‘promote a new aesthetic of food’ (p. 170), which they see as the main contribution of new social movements (though, in passing, they note that revalorisation is also concerned with conviviality and social justice).

Roberta Sassatelli, in chapter 8, is also concerned with emergent orientations of recent years, but for her it is moral re-evaluation which is central. She argues that consumption has now become a topic of everyday ethical thinking and that we have recently seen a shift in popular concerns away from self-regarding attitudes to consumption. Consumption is posed not as an opportunity for hedonistic and selfish behaviour, nor as the active pursuit of uncontrolled wants. Rather, notions of ‘duty’ and consideration of the ‘public good’ are thematised by individuals and groups promoting alternative attitudes to consumption. Offering a variety of messages and justifications, discourses of alternative consumption, as they become more widespread, present a new sense of consumer sovereignty, defined in terms more of the individual’s ‘duty’ than of the individual’s ‘right’. Sassatelli proposes a classification of alternative consumption activities and concerns, and illustrates them with some examples of recent consumer movements and boycotts.

She shows that quality is multi-dimensional: substantively, it is not a matter just of safety or price; procedurally, it is accorded in a process described

by conventions theory, wherein quality is established and attributed in the course of justifications, emerging often from contested episodes. Contestations can result in a change in the register of judgement or the moral valency of particular actions. While these shifts are not yet great in terms of breadth of influence, she argues that they are a reason for optimism about the future. Consumer behaviour certainly can be oriented towards positive moves in the improvement of quality of life and the public good.

Sassatelli notes that the critique of consumption offered in the contemporary alternative movement, unlike some of the precursors, is neither especially ascetic nor anti-hedonistic. It is accepted that consumption is a necessary part of daily life and existence. It is not to be condemned outright; nor, indeed, is the appropriate attitude one of suspicion. Rather it is a matter of consuming in a suitably thoughtful and selective manner.

In the Conclusion we review the alternative approaches set out in the eight chapters to assess progress towards a better developed conceptualisation of food quality and, in particular, of processes of qualification in the realm of food. We then consider areas that require still further treatment, discussing possibilities for further empirical research and theoretical development grouped under the headings 'biology and ecology', 'history and cuisine', 'cooking and eating' and 'innovation and competition'.

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