

Histoire de la qualité alimentaire, XIXe–XXe siècles [History of food quality during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries]. By *Alessandro Stanziani*. Paris: Seuil, 2005. 440 pp. Index, notes, tables. €26.00. ISBN: 2-020-78841-1.

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In this fascinating and innovative history of food quality in France, Alessandro Stanziani directs his opening analysis to economists and economic historians, a strategy that allows him to revisit certain “dogmas” of economic theory. First, like other historians who have demonstrated the coexistence of norms and margins of maneuverability in the economy (see, for example, Jean-Pierre Hirsch, *Les deux rêves du commerce* [1991]), Stanziani seeks to show that economic action (such as calculations and decisions) never takes place in a legal vacuum and to demonstrate that norms are essential to the marketplace. His second point, which applies also to the law itself, is that the marketplace is a social construct of concerns not only to individuals who are faced with choices but also to social groups that are in conflict with each other. His third argument is that a product does not possess any intrinsic quality: the quality of wine or meat differs as a function of period and place and is even affected by the people who produce or consume them at the time. Therefore, the “falsification” of such products cannot be defined in absolute terms.

These three affirmations are central to Stanziani’s thesis, and his four case studies—on wine, meat, milk, and butter—provide convincing evidence to back them up. He analyzes the genesis of the rules and norms that have defined and controlled these four products, beginning in the eighteenth century and continuing through the twentieth century. He describes practices that were considered fraudulent or falsifying (e.g., “watering down” wine) and explains why, at various times, certain parties demanded laws prohibiting practices that had once been readily accepted. Having detailed the genesis of “special laws” for these four products, Stanziani explains the origins of the 1905 French law on fraud and falsification, and he describes its application in the years following its passage. (The history of this law has also been described by Pierre-Antoine Dessaux, most notably in his thesis, “Des Vermicelliers au groupe Danone,” *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, 2003.) Stanziani shows that this law was

particularly important in France, since it led to the emergence of administrative structures that still exist today, such as the Fraud Prevention Office of the Ministry of the Economy. (The law was overturned in 1993.) With these four cases, Stanziani effectively demonstrates three points: the importance of law in defining economic activity; the social construction of markets by different parties (farmers, shopkeepers, politicians, “hygienists,” scientists, experts, bureaucrats); and the changing definition of product “qualities.”

In addition, Stanziani confirms and expands upon recent historical studies of the state and of business. He points out that the state is not a monolithic block, and that its different functions and services can result in contradictory policies on products. An example would be the divergence in policies on food processing: one branch protects consumers from dangerous practices; the other gives information to consumers, who can then use this knowledge to choose the product they wish to buy. The first policy is based on concerns about public health; the second is based on the philosophy of competitive discipline. Stanziani writes that the latter position, a kind of reformed liberalism, won out in the battle between hygienists and economic actors.

Stanziani is correct in showing that markets were still regional at the beginning of the twentieth century, thus overturning the long-held belief that the French market became uniform early on. He also points to ways in which farmers or shopkeepers can help to achieve the passage of laws (notably by working through organizations such as chambers of commerce and lobbying elected officials), and he describes, in turn, the consequences that the development of laws can have on them. Thus, he concludes, it is critical for these groups to become familiar with the law in order to avoid making mistakes or being cheated during business transactions. It is important, too, for historians to be aware of entrepreneurs’ experience of law and of their capacity to lobby.

Finally, Stanziani emphasizes the connection between the years preceding and following the beginning of the twentieth century, the period covered in this study, and the present. This crucial period at the turn of the century witnessed the emergence of foreign markets, rising urbanization, the introduction of new techniques in food processing (chemistry), and the democratization of certain consumption practices (e.g., drinking Sauternes). Apparently, the transformation of modes of production and food

consumption—like the arrival of new industrial products—disorients all active parties in a sector, as they have become used to established methods of product manufacturing and usage. Stanziani demonstrates there is much common ground between turn-of-the-century Europeans and today's residents. In this way, European norms continue to be based on ideas embedded in the French law of 1905 (two examples would be concerns about genetically modified organisms and tobacco): once consumers are informed, they are free to choose a product and assume the responsibility for that choice. The state's responsibility is to ensure that the manufacturer's or producer's information is correct. Current food crises (like "mad-cow disease") are similar to those of the past (for example, bovine tuberculosis at the end of the nineteenth century), if only with regard to relations between scientists (or, at the turn of the century, hygienists), who have become "experts," and politicians, who use these experts to further their own interests.

Stanziani's principal thesis raises questions on a number of points, as do the many arguments he provides in its support. The first challenge might be to his decision to generalize the thesis across time, space, and other sectors. We can query his claim of a link between the early 1900s and the situation that exists today: Stanziani does not study the possible application of the 1905 law throughout the twentieth century, nor does he ask if there are important discrepancies, especially after 1960. We can ask also about the singularity of France. Was the development of food processing specific to France, or did it evolve in a similar manner in all industrialized countries? Does the role of food in defining national identity make the food sector especially important in France, both economically and symbolically? Another question arrives on the heels of that one: does his thesis apply to the manufacturing industry and other sectors? Political scientist Gunnar Trumbull indirectly answers some of these questions in *Consumer Capitalism* (forthcoming), where he examines the laws passed between 1970 and 1990 to protect consumers in France and Germany. He contrasts the French model of consumer protection, which bans certain practices and products as dangerous, with the German paradigm, which gives consumers correct information and then allows them free rein in deciding what to buy. Clearly, Stanziani's French model (based on the food-production sector in France at the turn of the century) does not overlap with Trumbull's (based on all sectors during the period from 1970 to 1990). Irrespective of the difference in scholarly

approach (historical versus political) or in historical periods, the question of why there was such a divergence between Stanziani's and Trumbull's conclusions remains. Further research is needed on the birth of consumer rights in European countries during the twentieth century. Some possible topics for exploration are national particularities, interactions between countries, contradictions and reversals, and finally plans to create a European law of consumption.

A second challenge might be to Stanziani's view that the consumer has been absent from the development of law. In his view, consumers are passive and do not participate in the process, which makes them uninteresting (pp. 431–32). I would counter this claim by saying that consumers do participate in the social construction of markets, since they must know how to consume, they must be familiar with the laws, and they have to know which products to buy or to reject. Although there was no official consumer association involved in the genesis of the law of 1905, this does not mean that consumers played no part in its evolution. The act of choosing what to purchase, and the existence of consumer cooperatives (as Ellen Furlough has shown in *Consumer Cooperation in France* [1991]) and consumers' leagues are evidence to the contrary. These leagues, in particular, were active in a different legal sphere, that of labor, using modes of consumption as a tool of social reform.

These and many other questions emerge from a reading of what is unquestionably a finely crafted and fascinating work, one to be recommended to economists, historians, and the general public. At a time when the posthumous works of a pioneer in the history of food retailing, Thierry Nadau (*Itinéraires marchands du goût moderne* [2005]), are being published, food production and retailing in France becomes a fertile field for research. It also provides a forum for discussing the link between consumption and citizenship in the developed world.

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