Conclusion: quality and processes of qualification

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A book about quality is inevitably about controversy over standards, and the foregoing chapters display a set of diverse and detailed observations and analyses of what it is to make a claim that something is of *better* quality than something else. This has been a central issue of wider social scientific and cultural discussion for a couple of decades, a result of the development of postmodernist thought. Who shall decide what is good, and how might such goodness be established in a non-arbitrary and non-self-interested way? Claims to quality, like claims to value or good taste, become highly problematical in the face of such questions. Several of the chapters contribute very useful clarifications of some of the issues involved, particularly because they are addressing substantive items in the social realm rather than dealing with them at a purely abstract epistemic level.

Between them, the authors make a very sound case for the existence of many relevant qualities, or different dimensions of ‘quality’, reminding anyone who would want to use the term that it is not a unified one-dimensional concept. Nor is it one that can easily be defined and delimited. Genevieve Teil and Antoine Hennion are perhaps the most radical in their insistence that, as regards quality in food, several criteria pertain, none of which has priority. They observe that academic disciplines, which have themselves in the past taken on the role of arbiters of quality, tend to view the matter narrowly in the light of the presuppositions of their own specialisms and theoretical preoccupations. Yet, when looked at from even a short distance beyond the boundaries of sociology or sensory physiology, it becomes very difficult not to agree that there are multiple criteria, none of which can be dismissed as irrelevant. As these authors demonstrate (p. 25), quality cannot be considered to be inherent to the product; nor is it simply a matter of some conventional agreement. It is not independent of context, and it cannot be separated from some sense of processing through the individual heart and body: ‘Different people in different situations bring into play a collective knowledge, of which taste is a result. In other words, taste is a way of building relationships, with

things and with people; it is not simply a property of goods, nor is it a competence of people.'

This view of quality as a multidimensional concept is further strengthened by considering the variety of different attributes considered in this book. Quality is variously understood as being constituted by religious, moral and aesthetic dimensions, and the several chapters that focus on provenance as an attribute draw attention to geographical, organisational and institutional factors. A book aimed at providing an exhaustive review of different quality attributes could also have included contributions from sensory studies, biology, toxicology, psychology and others.

Thus we are forced to question the idea of a privileged observer role for social scientists, or any other disciplinary specialist, and allow the possibility that 'amateurs', or enthusiasts, have a better (because quasi-interdisciplinary) appreciation of the several grounds on which judgements might be founded. What Teil and Hennion then advocate methodologically is the observation and analysis in detail of the ways in which, in practical everyday contexts, people go about making judgements. They emphasise the process of determining quality – *how* quality is established – as indeed, in different ways, do all our authors. If there is one lesson to be learned here it is that determining quality is a *social process*.

In a variety of ways, emanating from the distinct methodological approaches taken, all of the authors share the view that quality comes to be attributed in the process of qualification. There is a describable social process whereby products come to be understood to have particular properties which are valued or, equally, come to be despised. It is not the products in themselves, nor is it simply the social characteristics of the persons pronouncing judgement, that determine how an item is evaluated. Rather there is a complex of social and economic processes, and a set of competing discourses, out of which emerges an (always contestable and therefore always provisional) approximate consensus about value. Approaches differ markedly between, say, amateur tasting, social worlds, and SFSCs, but it is commonly accepted that quality is the outcome of processes of qualification. All treat quality as something made, not given; and all turn their analyses to different understandings of ways of *quality*-making, for which we have adopted (from Allaire) *qualification* as the general term.

The authors identify mechanisms occurring at different stages in the process of establishing a claim to quality. It is not just, as Roos observed during the CRIC international workshop, that different conceptions of quality pertain in different parts of the food chain. Rather, in addition, the modes of activity involved operate in accordance with different logics. Thus Gronow describes the internal operation of social worlds, Murdoch and Miele call on the logic of social movements to understand the phenomenon of Slow Food, while Teil and Hennion emphasise the role of reflexivity as integral to the appreciation of things. The extent to which these are complementary rather than competing ways of understanding the process we lay to one side for the

moment. What all of the authors show, however, is that the process is far less a matter of personal opinion than it is a collective determination of quality. Individual judgement is developed in ongoing interaction and dialogue with other people who suggest and confirm personal views. That a judgement is collective, however, does not mean that it is indisputable. Indeed, establishing value is accomplished through controversies which, though often conducted in an entirely friendly and cooperative manner, are not therefore without profound impact on commercial competition or consequence for social distinction.

None of this answers the question of what kinds of actors are most able to make their claims about quality stick. Who has the authority to pass judgement, and of what kind is that authority? These were fundamental issues posed by postmodern thought; does anyone, and should anyone, have that authority? There are several responses presented here. Murdoch and Miele identify new forms of expertise emerging from social movements, challenging old authorities in the name of consumers. Teil and Hennion argue for the superior value of claims made by amateurs, or lay-persons, as against those of experts. For them, the amateur is the only true expert. The judgements of *practitioners*, engaged in their everyday activities, are the only properly grounded ones. Practitioners, thus, have much to teach theorists. But not all of the contributors are satisfied with this. Gronow, in searching for an objective element to aesthetics, is clearly looking for some condition beyond individuals within particular social circles achieving consensus. Conventional standards have foundations other than current local opinion.

The chapters of this book illustrate some of the ways in which the duty of interpretation may be conducted, suggesting a number of different ways to handle the quandaries of judgement. They do not suggest any single solution to the perennial problem of validating judgements of taste or quality. But they provide a set of investigative techniques, or methodological protocols, for addressing that most intriguing of social science questions: how do people come to think that some things are better than others – in this case, that some foods are of finer quality than others. As Teil and Hennion indicate, it is very hard to imagine that either the intrinsic attributes of the product or the authority of some judge is a sufficient basis for a sound answer. They, like most of the book's authors, proceed instead to examine how judgements actually are formed in practical contexts. They try to answer the question: what are the processes that make possible the framing of a recommendation which ensues from the qualities of an item?

The methodological protocols are varied. Several authors make use of conventions theory, which is particularly useful because it focuses attention on the conduct of potential and actual controversies which occur when actors insist on comparing incommensurable qualities. The central idea that in the course of arguments disputants shift the grounds of debate between different 'orders of worth' – between, for example, aesthetic, economic and

ethical registers – captures some of the dynamics of the process whereby claims to quality are advanced and interrogated.

Ultimately, this approach views quality as entirely contingent, specific to time and space. For others, this is to ignore questions of who has greatest capability to make themselves heard and who is the greatest authority to determine outcomes. That implies taking wider cognisance of the power relations between key actors in the field, examining the priorities of each and seeing whether those priorities are imposed on others. Institutional approaches to processes of regulation, as exemplified by Barling in chapter 5, offer a way in which to evaluate claims to quality. A third approach concentrates on describing the processes by which particular judgements are made, in concrete circumstances, leaving largely in abeyance the question of whether some are inherently more worthy – or, indeed, practically more persuasive – than others. Accounts like those of Teil and Hennion and Murdoch and Miele represent quality as an *outcome* of a process of continual negotiation, fluid and unstable, a matter constantly subject to revision according to circumstances. Gronow also accepts that judgements are constantly subject to challenge and alteration, but is more concerned to analyse the general preconditions which operate to establish consensus among groups of practitioners or members of social worlds. Outcomes are, then, not so unpredictable, the range of plausible judgments not so wide, the degree of individual discretion not so great. Even in aesthetic matters, the organisation of social worlds ensures at least some quasi-objective standards whereby judgements must be made. A final investigative framework might be described as one based on ‘thick description’ of social processes which lead to the common acceptance of that complex *mélange* of definitive intrinsic attributes and relevant positive valuations which comprise elements sufficient to ascribe satisfactory quality to product, as with halal meat in Bergeaud-Blackler’s account.

Taken together, these do not yet suggest a single coherent solution, but they surely preclude simple acceptance of the orthodox view that the problem of European food is guaranteeing its safety, thereby reestablishing consumer trust, and reject the idea that there is some common single metric or analytic process of judgement (or set of criteria) with which to establish that some food is quality food.

It is reassuring that our contributors do not simply equate quality with safety, or attribute uncertainties and worries to perceptions of risk and problems of information. It is indeed unfortunate that so much of the analysis of contemporary food controversies has been filtered through the lens of the ‘risk society’ thesis. While there is something compelling about the claim that our current anxieties revolve around invisible dangers created by modern science – BSE and fears about GMOs are prototypical examples – the thesis has numerous flaws. Questions arising from the shifting significance of ‘Bordeaux’, ‘fair trade’ or ‘religious’ quality, or the aesthetics of tasting are

just some of the quality issues that escape reduction to a risk analysis of quality and its crises. The limitations of risk reductionism are revealed by viewing the controversy over quality within *alternative* conceptual frameworks, as has been done in this book. Here the single overarching description of the problem as inestimable risk is replaced by framings which capture the complexity of the processes by which judgements come to be made.

All of our contributors agree that the processes leading to claims to quality are to an extent a rhetorical manoeuvre. Actors seek to attach to their products, their practices and their preferences the 'quality' tag. Often this is a means of emphasising a particular attribute which is in the interests, or is a main concern, of those who enunciate the claim. Products have, for instance, many distinct qualities that appeal differentially to potential customers. Familiarity, innovativeness, renown, consistency, technical virtuosity, religious acceptability and ethical legitimacy – all are qualities that in certain circumstances will recommend a product to a purchaser. No wonder that those engaged in commercial competition operate, in part, by emphasising some qualities rather than others, and by talking up those qualities – for instance, through advertising – which are calculated to have greatest effect. Promotion, as the culturally savvy populations familiar with mass media codes know very well, is an exercise in rhetoric, and audiences are suitably sceptical in their reception of such messages. But no author in this book is entirely happy with the view that we should understand quality as simply and solely victory in a rhetorical context, notwithstanding that effective rhetorical promotion is consequential. Quality cannot be reduced to, or rather the analysis of quality cannot be abandoned by, presuming that the most effective rhetorical performances determine the outcomes of contests over judgements. That would imply, for one thing, that the distribution of resources and power had no effect in establishing conventions of judgement.

Quality is contextual and, in important senses, fluid. The claim to quality needs to be made continually, and it is clear that claims accepted in some quarters will be rejected in others. The sense in which there is continual dialogue, competition and controversy is one clear lesson. The social procedures by means of which people come to make judgements, and make them stick, are very complex, and we still have no satisfactory answer as to what makes some qualities adhere to particular products. Convention theory has no answer – it is contingent, and there is probably insufficient consideration of the operation of power in the process of qualification. The social worlds account probably attributes little power to consumers either, but does identify the role of enthusiasts and their supporters in shaping understandings and evaluations. There is here an identification of agents and some explanation of how influence operates to establish value, even if only temporarily. Such enthusiasm might be seen as a related aspect of contemporary commercial consumer culture. Teil and Hennion see the process as equally contingent and in some ways highly temporary and transitory, though again they stress the importance of engagement and a certain type of reflexivity in

establishing standards. For them, standards are informally established, never able to be subjected to formalised and authorised guarantee.

The nature of the relationship between power and opinion is not simple. Sociologists have always recognised that the content of much communication is influenced by the interests of the actors delivering a message, and that those with most power are likely to be persuasive. Power and truth are often at odds with one another. But it is often difficult to prove who has power, and there is no simple causal link between power and consensus. Moreover, there are important asymmetries of power between retailers, manufacturers and farmers, and between consumers and each of the former. Indeed, Marsden argues that quality is inherently contested in power conflicts between these different actors endowed with different forms of power. The question of the dominance, or hegemony, of a particular 'logic of quality' becomes a historical and comparative matter – one of 'when and in what circumstances?'.

One might argue that there are now rather more agencies involved in the process of qualification than in the past. More departments of state take an interest in the various attributes of food system – nutrition, safety, economic competitiveness, national interest. The EC presents an additional level of regulatory activity: new agencies, like the FSA in the UK, have come into being, taxed with an impartial advisory role and speaking especially as the voice of consumers who are now supposed to be consulted through organisational channels and not merely through the offerings of the market. Then there are the market actors themselves which, in the UK especially the supermarkets, exercise both industrial strength and officially devolved regulatory powers. All these actors tend to bring with them their own preferred criteria for judging quality. Their competing concerns provoke aggravation. The scope for controversy expands.

As Marsden points out 'quality reallocates power and constructs consumer interests'. The effect of successful ascriptions of quality alters the relations between the actors. In this book we have directed comparatively little attention up-stream. Marsden is an exception, in that he explores how quality is associated among producers in Wales with expensive local niche produce. Academics sometime succumb to the same temptation to consider quality as that which is not mass produced, to forget that consistency and low cost are attributes which appeal positively to a large section of the population. But in terms of producers appealing to niche markets – a practice which can only increase within Europe as barriers to international trade are soon to be further dismantled – quality is associated with the local, the knowable, the specialised and the exclusive. Allaire discussed the process of producers and states protecting markets by getting products linked to place or *terroir*, through the use of various labels of product origins, as a means both of establishing distinction, authenticity and perfection and of obtaining commercial advantage. One way that such advantage can be achieved is through emphasising the scarcity attribute. A food product containing rare ingredients, such as caviar or truffle, would often be perceived as of higher quality than one

based on more widely available ingredients. The former will usually be able to command a higher price than the latter. But firms and governments can create scarcity by controlling the availability of products and by instituting place-of-origin quality labels, as Allaire explains.

Marsden points out that regulation in the field of food – increasingly a hybrid function of public and private governance – is a lens through which one can estimate inequalities of power as one traces the procedures through which relations between actors are channelled. The exploration of the adding of value along the chain is a similar means of inference in understanding the relative power of actors in the market stages of the food system. In addition, many of the grounds for recognising some foods as of high quality are precisely a consequence of their formal recognition and regulation, through systems like *Appellation Contrôlée*, *DOC*, not to mention claims made by marketing organisations, for Scottish beef for instance. By such regulations states are able to continue to protect small and diverse producer organisations in the face of economic globalisation. The scant attention paid in the book to the up-stream stages in establishing quality is intentional: our primary focus of attention are comparatively neglected aspects of consumption, a realm where quality arises as contentious in a particularly illuminating way.

To inquire into quality requires that attention is paid also to ethics and aesthetics. Aesthetics has eclipsed ethics. New concerns associated with the aestheticising of culture add a further dimension. Though not an issue for states and not a subject of regulation, the spread of gourmet considerations has added another dimension to judgement. For some people, and arguably for some countries, ‘quality’ refers less to properties of safety, which could be regulated, than to some intrinsic attributes of pleasure to be derived from eating. Having sufficient food is no longer a major consideration for much of the population of Europe, but aesthetic criteria are strongly present – manifested in the creation of gourmet-club cultures, national culinary identity, regional authenticity, etc. In terms of conventions theory, which is used very effectively, if mostly in passing, by several of our authors, industrial and market orders of worth are not central to much of the public and media discussion of food, whereas attention is paid more to other orders of worth – renown (including brands and *DOC*), civics (in ethical food) and domestic (familiarity and local proximity). Probably this is a feature of a middle-class protest voice. We do not much doubt that science, large corporate producers and multiple retailers have sufficient power to defeat and/or incorporate such opposition. There is nevertheless vocal opposition, couched partly in ethical, partly in aesthetic, terms – from social movements to lifestyle consultants – which is playing a full part in controversy over food and challenging powerful vested interests.

Perhaps aesthetic considerations are just insignificant play at the edges of the dominant understanding of quality and price pedalled by hegemonic economics? There are many who would say that price remains the principal concern of the majority of consumers, and there is much in the commercial

world that would suggest price consciousness is paramount. One could see this historical conjuncture as an achievement – security of supply, lack of contaminants and alleviation of monotony would have been more important than quality in the past. But, equally, the USA, as the largest (in all senses) food nation in the world, might be seen to currently face a quantity rather than quality crisis. Kraft, one of the biggest global food producers, is now engaged in a new moral rhetoric of moderation. The message is not even the Leninist one of better less but better, but simply better less of the same.

In terms of conceptual advance, perhaps the most promising substantive conceptual notion contained in this collection is that of processes of ‘qualification’. We do not yet have enough of the axioms and principles which would constitute a synthetic theory of the processes of ‘qualification’, but several ideas have been thematised which might contribute to moving that intellectual process forward. Equally engaging has been the range of views concerning judgement of quality (and how that relates to the processes of qualification). Less consolidation, more fuel for further debate, this most persistent of social science issues, the basis on which hierarchies of judgement are established, is revealed to be highly contested, even *within* the social sciences: quality as highly contingent or quality as objective attribute.

Broadening the food quality question

The book has collected together a number of contrasting approaches to quality of food. In adopting particular theoretical and methodological standpoints, of course, some avenues are opened up, while others are passed by. In this final section, we reflect on some major considerations about quality of food that might constitute significant and unexplored avenues. There are four main avenues, and they are broad: biology and ecology; history and cuisine; cooking and eating; innovation and competition. They join at a roundabout, around which circulate questions concerning the specificity of quality of food. Are the registers to quality in food different from those to quality in music, architecture, clothing and visual arts? And if so, why? For example, are there similar or different articulations between the outcomes of high gastronomic art and junk food, as there are between classical music and muzak? Why is there no comparable succession of quality style to food as renaissance, baroque, classical, etc, although there is *nouvelle cuisine*, a question concerning differences in historical constructions of quality? Can there be an equivalent in food quality to the revolutions in music arising from the well-tempered scale or from atonality, or the transforming potentiality of concrete in architecture? Has there been a growth of fashion in food quality, similar to that in clothing, where the periodicity of changing fashion is inherent to quality? In what different ways are food quality distinctions articulated with social, symbolic or cultural capital as compared to these other domains? Food manners and concert-going have both similarities and differences in the reproduction of distinction. Or, instead of these domains, should we be comparing food

quality with quality of transport? In other words, what is it about food that involves particular articulations between the aesthetic and the utilitarian? Are food quality crises (e.g. obesity) similar to crises in road congestion or death-rates on the road, or to crises in modernist architecture? We have seen identified in the various chapters safety crises, ethical crises, aesthetic crises, environmental crises, but why do these quality crises combine in the ways they do in food particularly? The roundabout is a busy one, and there could be many more questions yet to come.

The first broad avenue feeding the roundabout is the specific role of *biology and ecology* in food quality. In advanced economies, people live longer and grow significantly taller than they did, even over the relatively short span of a couple of centuries. Not all of this can be attributed to food, of course, or to quality as opposed to quantity. There are well-established epidemiologies of food habits and a variety of human diseases. But toxicity, nutritional value, the physiology of taste, digestive processes – all register an impact on food quality. Hearing certain music can harm (cause hearing damage) or be aesthetically truly painful, but not poison the listener. So the theoretical questions generated by this first avenue concern the *interaction* between biological processes and socio-economic and cultural processes of qualification of food. In terms of the physiology of taste, it is true, different cultures educate people to be pleased or disgusted by the same food, but they do so by and with the same biological sensual apparatus of taste, texture and smell. Excessive doses of arsenic and prions are fatal in any culture. Food allergies have biological symptoms. The role of the body in respect of food is different from its role in respect of music or of housing. Statements such as ‘adult tasters of 6-n-propylthioracil (PROP) are more sensitive to bitter taste and fattiness in foods, and often show lower acceptance of foods that are high in these taste qualities’ (Keller et al. 2002: 3) are becoming increasingly prominent in scientific journals, with significant advances in establishing genetic predispositions towards taste. Some of these studies have attempted to segment populations into ‘supertasters’, ‘medium tasters’ and ‘non-tasters’, according to the intensity with which each group is able to taste PROP, and have argued that there is a palpable genetic basis for such characterisation. This need not lead to a genetic reductionist view of taste. Rather, it suggests that the cultural and historical processes of qualification involve a particular relationship between organic matter and human physiology to make biologically good food, so that while there are enormous differences in the composition of diets, there is always a biological bottom line. So the question is how aesthetic or ethical dimensions, for example, are articulated with this biological bottom line to constitute the specificity of food quality.

That question, as raised by the chapters in this book, is most frequently posed in the negative, especially through the spectre of BSE, invoked variously as inevitable outcome of global industrial capitalist agriculture, the loss of connection between humans and nature, the lack of personal knowledge of the farmer and his organic cow Daisy, or the sinful treatment of animals

as human fodder. But the spectre invoked rarely regards the outbreak of BSE on animal health and its consequent appearance as vCJD in humans as a biological process, related to the as yet relatively poorly understood nature of prions. The behaviour of prions in industrial fodder under certain treatment processes, their transference through reproduction or ingestion, and their subsequent behaviour in animal and human physiologies are what produced the epidemics. And prions are not a fabrication of industrialisation or globalisation. Nor do they belong, in terms of actor-network theory, to the same or an equivalent domain of actors. In that respect, foot-and-mouth, dioxin poisoning, Salmonella and E.coli poisoning are both biologically *and* socio-economically very different types of crisis. Although the 1918–19 influenza epidemic and the SARS outbreak may be characterised as, respectively, prototypically twentieth- and twenty-first-century diseases, no one suggests that mass urbanisation should be reversed or global travel suppressed, as if these were the *causes* of the diseases to which remedies had to be applied.¹ The question, therefore, is one of how biological factors interact and combine with socio-economic and cultural food causalities, rather than of explaining such a quality crisis in terms of one type of causality or another in either socio-reductionist or biological reductionist ways.

In a similar fashion, *ecology*, as the second carriageway of this avenue, generates distinctive questions about food quality, and again ecologies of food production and consumption are in interaction with socio-cultural differences, rather than reducible to them. Different ecologies clearly have a major impact on food provisioning systems, in terms of variety, aesthetic characteristics, nutritional value and content, in ways that need to be developed further than the perspectives offered by a ‘grow local’ or short supply chain approach. The available lexicon of ingredients for the construction of cuisines in semi-desert, sub-arctic, temperate sub-tropical or tropical ecologies is of considerable significance, and the cuisines are no more directly derivable from the lexicon than the ingredients are simply cultural constructs. But in listing these ecologies, a misleading emphasis may be drawn to suggest different cuisines in distinct natural environments, when, in most cases, including hunter–gatherer food provisioning systems, there is an intermediary nature between society and ‘naturally occurring’ nature, namely cultivated ecologies. Overwhelmingly, differences in food quality are derivatives of cultivated nature, and it is the diversity of cultivated ecologies that form the basis of interactions between environments and socio-economic and cultural processes. Wild almonds contain toxic levels of arsenic, and only as a result of long processes of hybridisation and cloning did almonds become safe to eat, a couple of millennia ago. Agricultural land and all food produce developed from it are both cultivated natural and socio-economic ecologies.

Whereas original local biodiversity in naturally occurring ecologies led to different trajectories of cultivation and consumption, for millennia, travel, trade and diffusion have resulted in the substantial restructuring of food and food quality, but only as a consequence of variation between different

cultivated ecologies. Single, local ecology food, is a peculiarly twenty-first-century construct. Sugar, the potato, the tomato, maize and many other 'New World' foods transformed the range and scope of culinary expression, but in distinct and uneven ways in different European food provisioning and culinary systems (Mintz 1986; Zuckermann 1999; Harvey et al. 2003). The contrast in historical trajectories of the potato and the tomato in Europe, Ireland or Italy, France or England is evidence of the complexity of interactions between agricultures and food consumption. Transfers from one ecology to another involved both a cultivation and a consumption transformation, new agricultural processes and hybrids, as well as new cuisines and culinary hybrids. It is difficult to think of quality transformations in other domains that involve this kind of complex interaction with ecologies, and it is for this reason that ecology contributes to the specificities of food quality.

One of the key alterations in the relationship between cultivated ecologies and food provisioning and consumption, although prefigured by earlier developments, occurred with mass urbanisation. It is well known that industrial revolution was preceded and facilitated by agricultural revolution producing surpluses permitting population movement and a new qualitative structural separation of urban from rural society. The fundamental questions of global sustainability relate to this configuration of cultivated nature and socio-economies, where the ecosystem as a whole embraces both the urban conglomerations and diversely cultivated natures, within a periphery of non-cultivated natures (Green et al. 2003). This ecosystem is one in which the quality and sustainability of mass urban food has become the irreversibly dominant feature, and has generated issues of standardisation, aesthetics, nutrition, and hygiene that are quite specific to the quality of food. In this respect, it may be worth a brief contrast with mass urban architecture. Tower blocks replaced tenements and then were turned into detested monoliths of little boxes, a largely discarded (at least temporarily) quality standardisation. If deconcentration and the spread of housing into rural areas is clearly not an ecological solution, new forms of high-density housing quality for large urban populations are necessary, and in global terms will be increasingly so. That being the case, if there is to be an alternative to McDonaldisation (no close equivalent to tower blocks), then, likewise, there will have to be new forms of mass urban food quality. That is the quality, as well as eco-sustainability, challenge.

In order to progress, however, the second avenue, equally broad, of *history and culture* needs to be widened, and indeed has already unavoidably intruded into biological and ecological questions of the specificity of food quality. And, following the previous section, it may be remarked, first, that already there have been several major transformations of high-density urban food quality in many European and US food cultures. These transformations have been of the whole 'qualification process' from farm to fork, and passing through different intermediaries, with different ranges of interpreters and discursive frames, recasting the registers of quality.

With apologies for UK parochialism, the example of fish and chips represented a minor revolution in working-class food quality, and it went through several quality leaps; and in recent times it has witnessed further product and service differentiation, with new chains and outlets (Walton 1992). From becoming a major source of urban working-class takeaway meals for dual earner families in the period from the mid-late nineteenth century to the Second World War, quality (of cooking oils, vinegar, potatoes, fish), standardisation (price, portion size) and cooking processes were matters of great controversy. The 1907 Public Health Act attempted to control quality across several dimensions, describing fish and chips as ‘an offensive trade’, and legislative changes were made through to 1936. There were also many homilies about the quality of the food as undermining family cooking, encouraging laziness and debauchery – with the food being standard fare for ‘falling out’ time when the pubs shut. But there is little question that there has been an improvement in the quality of fish and chips, especially in the cooking oils used, partly as a result of increasing regulatory and market barriers to entry to unregulated and ‘front-room’ businesses. The story of the American hamburger, likewise, is one of major qualitative transformations and improvements through standardisation and quality competition from the emergence of the White Castle chain in the interwar period, squeezing out adulterated meat and establishing dedicated supply chains with traceability (Hogan 1997). This transformation represented most of all the emergence of a new form of food quality related to the newly mobile consumer: standardisation and reliability of quality across vast geographical spaces, so that a consumer could be assured of buying the same quality in Wichita or New York. These are just two examples of the need to look at historical transformation of quality in general, but also with respect particularly to mass urban food quality.

The second, and parallel, carriageway of this avenue is cuisine as a vehicle crucial to the articulation of food quality, its registers of evaluation, its raw materials and its process of provisioning. The meeting of the ‘New’ and ‘Old’ Worlds clearly was a major historical as well as ecological quality transformation, in both directions. But it also resulted in a major cuisine transformation, if one regards the European and Mediterranean cuisines prior to the tomato, the potato, maize, capsicum, chocolate, and many other now central components of many culinary vocabularies (Coe 1994; Santich 1995; Coe and Coe 1996). It has long been recognised that cuisines are ‘good for thinking with’ (Levi-Strauss 1970), but from the standpoint of an analysis of food quality, the key aspect of a cuisine is the construction of a repertoire of relationships between qualities, and hence a quality as an articulation of multiple evaluations and evaluative criteria. It is clearly important to go beyond an analysis of food quality in terms of separate items of an overall diet, tasting, production, and so on, to view cuisines as qualifying systems. Major national variations in these qualifying systems may underpin widely different conceptions of quality that might be missed by viewing, say, the quality of beef in a post-BSE food provisioning system. It has been

argued that a major ‘qualitative turn’ occurred in post-Medieval Europe when control over excessive gluttony, or quantity, was transformed into control over quality, with the emergence of a bourgeois culture of gastronomy, and its strong and enduring contrasts as between France and England (Mennel 1985).

Cuisines as qualifying systems lead us easily into the third main avenue that opens out further questions concerning the specificities of food quality, namely *cooking* and *eating*. Many of the contributions to this volume considered quality as *purchased* quality, and the analysis of quality that came closest to eating was Teil and Hennion’s account of the performativity of tasting. Allaire considered cooking tangentially in terms of the economist’s view of a ‘buy-in’ as opposed to a ‘cook’ decision, whether to outsource cooking or to do it oneself in the home. However, any analysis of the qualification process for food that stops with the purchase of food misses a crucial specificity of food quality: the continuation of that process, to varying extents, by cooking and utilising skills available in the household as the main social institution of final food preparation. Indeed, cooking has been described as the ‘first great revolution’ of food (Fernandez-Armesto 2001). As an early example of the significance of cooking for quality, as distinct from quality as a property of a food ingredient, the Aztec practice of nixtamalisation (de-husking with lime and ash) transformed maize from a carbohydrate into a rich protein, so creating a food energy surplus that conferred comparative military advantage by enabling armies to march and fight with greater stamina (Coe 1994). Cooking thus changes not only physical quality, but the scales on which food may be evaluated and judged. Europeans adopted the food ingredient rather than the cooking technique, unaware of its virtues.

One can usefully question the relation between TV cookery programmes and actual domestic cooking, from none, where the function is pure entertainment, to significant, where the aim is primarily pedagogic. But, in both extremes these media-generated cultures of cooking, and then the social practices of cooking, take the quality of food beyond the act of purchase and beyond market provisioning systems into non-market areas of consumer routines and practices, the production and reproduction of cooking skills, and how these elaborate quality. In this area, the different and historically changing combinations in the *relations* between market and non-market processes of qualification become significant. It is clear that whatever separations or disconnections might exist between the consumer and the market’s provision, there is a persistently significant social connection between domestic production and consumption. In questioning this quality aspect of food, contrasts might be drawn with music or architecture: the disappearance of families entertaining themselves by playing music and the growth of DIY and lifestyle domestic spaces.

This leads us to ponder the need to bring eating into the accounts of food quality. As a culminating phase of the process of qualification, the institution

of the meal as a consumer practice, and its historical transformations and cultural differences, are clearly significant. The threat to commensality, moral homilies on 'grazing' or the TV dinner, are frequently presented as negative images in a qualitative evaluation of certain types of socially organised eating as constitutive of quality. Teil and Hennion note that the social context of tasting is part of the performativity of tasting for amateurs. In much more routine and generalised forms of practice, the different social organisation of eating, the structure of meals, the distinctions between the ceremonial and the everyday created by eating practices count among the many possible aspects to the process of food qualification to which eating contributes. The social organisation of food consumption is structurally different from other domains of consumption, and eating therefore forms a significant reason why food qualification differs from other qualification processes. One might say, inviting further derision from sociologists, that the eating of food matters.

The final avenue connects the 'roundabout of quality' to 'up-stream' economic processes concerning the *innovative* and *competitive* activities of firms. While the principal focus of this book has been to examine quality in the consumption sphere, several of the contributions have tacitly recognised links to commercial considerations. This avenue of commercial innovation and competition links the 'roundabout of quality' to the 'roundabout of provision'. Innovation in food qualities, emanating from the R&D and marketing departments of seed, agro-chemical, food-processing and retail firms, goes hand-in-hand with the competitive imperatives of market share and profit. In considering the discussion contained in this book, it is clear that innovation strategies can be directed towards both substantive and symbolic quality attributes. Some of this attention has focused on reducing the cost of the provision of food, potentially enhancing the relative position of those firms that have followed this route in a context of price competition. Considerable innovative effort has been directed towards increasing agricultural yields and enhancing the (cost-)efficiency of food processing. But this book has indicated that price is only one quality attribute and that, in reality, the importance of competition between goods of identical attributes over price has been greatly exaggerated in orthodox economics. A far more common tendency has been for innovative firms to strategically circumvent price competition in favour of product differentiation based on quality differentiation and this has involved the development of new technologies to achieve improvements in performance in one or more quality attributes. Indeed, particular quality attributes might be seen as heuristic devices for organising the direction of firms' innovation strategies. The increasing specialisation in particular quality domains has been accompanied by an increasing range of specialist economic agents and there are now firms that specialise in the provision of food additives, preservation technologies, distribution and logistical services, packaging and the preparation of ready-made meals representing a variety of the world's cuisines. Aesthetic and symbolic innovation

are more likely to originate from the marketing departments of firms, drawing on the usual techniques of branding and advertising in persuading potential customers to purchase their food products. It is in this realm that the battle is fought, by firms, over which qualities are the more important and over the demonstration of superior performance for a given quality. Winning the rhetorical contest for quality has become a major strategic objective for many firms.

But this avenue is a two-way carriageway because consumers are also innovative and notoriously behave in ways that were not predicted by the firms selling to them. We have already discussed the importance of cooking and eating in establishing the importance of the social practices of qualification that occur beyond the point of purchase. It appears that the disjuncture between firms' expectations of what consumers do with products and the reality of what consumers do has become an increasingly important preoccupation among firms.

The rise in expenditure on market research by food-related companies during the twentieth century demonstrates the increasing pressure felt by competing firms to better understand the quality judgements made by consumers and the processes of qualification through which they arise. Initially, those efforts were directed mostly towards gathering intelligence to facilitate the marketing process, but increasingly similar techniques are being used to contribute to the development of new food products. In a striking cultural turnaround, ICI, the traditional smokestack chemicals firm, has reinvented itself as a provider of sensory experience. With foods as one major application area for their products, this change has brought about other significant shifts to the orientation of their innovation processes, with one key element now involving organised attempts to better understand how consumers make quality judgements on the basis of sensory experiences. With 400 different strawberry flavours, ICI regularly uses consumer trials to select which flavour product to use. To achieve this, consumer trials involve a combination of tasting exercises and focus group-style interviews, and the information generated is used in conjunction with genetic data regarding different predispositions to particular taste sensations. It would seem from this that ICI has gone some way towards learning the lessons of the amateur tasters as described by Teil and Hennion, by attempting to combine psychological, social, demographic, genetic and sensory approaches, while laying aside, for the sake of practical outcomes, any epistemic conflicts arising from the combination of those distinct approaches.

In reflecting on the varied dimensions of food quality and its specificity, it can be seen just how problematical the notion of quality is, but at the same time how questioning quality reinforces the obvious centrality of food in society, and brings to light the sometimes disruptive interactions between the biological, the ecological and the social. It is also clear that asking the quality question breaks down disciplinary boundaries, precisely because it asks us to look at the whole *process* of qualification, and hence the changing

relationships between market and non-market spheres, the breakages, the linkages and the shifting boundaries between production and consumption. It involves the rhetoric and the social worlds of amateurs, intermediaries and experts of all sorts, prions and semiotics. Conflicts and power relations between different processes of qualification generate the contemporary controversies between alternative qualities. We hope that this collection of approaches to food quality provides insight to the breadth and depth of the contemporary food quality crisis, and why a food quality crisis is different.

Notes

- 1 Cholera, typhoid, and dyptheria, on the other hand, can be seen as directly related to quality of food, and, as water-borne diseases, can be addressed by ensuring clean water supply and good sewage systems.

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