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Alessandro Stanziani, editor. *La qualité des produits en France (XVIIIe-XXe siècles)* Paris : Belin, 2004. Notes, index, 345 pages. 23€ (cl). ISBN 2701135462.

Review by Janine Marie Lanza, Wayne State University.

How did anyone know what to buy before we had brands and marketing? Who knew which soap to wash with or what wine to drink before the rise of Madison Avenue or shopper polls? Classic economic theory provides one answer: consumers, armed with static preferences and perfect information ferret out the products they purchase through a wholly rational process of choice. In this way of thinking, price and quantity, linked to the hallowed forces of supply and demand, rather than qualitative characteristics, are considered as the main drivers of consumer behavior. More recent, and culturally inflected, works like Thomas Franks' *The Conquest of Cool* or John Seabrook's *Nobrow* assert that consumer choice, now driven by an understanding of fads and coolness, derives from the broad cultural perceptions of products. These are largely fabricated by business and advertising interests rather than through the acts of consumers and producers, considered as cynical dupes. In this view, purchasers are certain they know the desirable product to buy, but their choices are only the products of the unacknowledged cues fed to them by corporate interests. Here, too, the definition of quality is not central to the exchange between producers and consumers.

The volume *La qualité des produits en France (XVIIIe-XXe)* takes a different approach to the question of how quality can be defined and understood, and tangentially why people buy the products they do. Here, Stanziani and the twelve other scholars who contribute essays to this volume assert that in fact these are not questions that have only arisen in the twentieth century, with the acceleration of the reach and diversity of commodity goods and the creation of brands and advertising campaigns, but that the question of consumer choice and the determination of quality has a long, complex history that can complicate and inform how we understand this process. The broad question the essays in this volume tackle is how consumers, regulators, and producers understand and define the notion of quality. In seeking to broaden this category, and examine it in myriad ways, Stanziani gathers scholars from a range of disciplines—history, economics, law, sociology—in order to decipher how different understandings of quality come together as producers create products, agents and governments regulate them, and, finally, consumers purchase them.

Although all the essays in this volume do not embrace a single approach to the understanding the development of the category of quality, they are unified in their rejection of a classical economic framework for the functioning of markets. As Stanziani asserts in his introduction, “[u]ne démarche critique à l’égard de la théorie néoclassique traditionnelle a consisté à renoncer aux hypothèses d’information parfait, de goûts stables et de préférences révélées des consommateurs” (p. 8). Rather, the contributors all embrace, to one degree or another, the hypothesis that the market is a social, legal, economic and institutional structure that functions through complex negotiations rather than simple transactions. Definitions of quality emerge from these interactions rather than through legal diktats, producer proclamations, or simply as a function of price. In this approach, the influence of the sociologist Harrison White, who

eschews the idea of perfect information in the market, is evident. These essays, in their sophisticated understandings of the interplay among producers, state actors, and consumers, provide an illuminating and stimulating approach to understanding the complexities of marketplace exchange.

The essays move chronologically from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, addressing how commercial practices and relationships changed over this period. The first three essays by Jean-Yves Grenier, Liliane Hélaire-Pérez and Philippe Minard all look at the ways relations among corporate bodies, the royal state and the emerging marketplace developed in the Old Regime. Grenier examines how the just price, the price seen as ideally reflecting both the value of a product and consumer need for it, emerged out of a negotiation involving producers, the state and market actors. Looking particularly at the grain market, his essay establishes the ways that multiple actors engaged in determining various elements of goods, including quality. This emphasis on the multiple sources of notions of quality marks all of the essays in this collection. Both Minard and Hélaire-Pérez address trade in cloth, arguing for the ways this sector of the economy functioned to create market innovation. For Hélaire-Pérez, the role of academic innovation, and the exams that inventors who developed new techniques for production took, created another dimension for judging quality, namely the ways that goods took advantage of innovation.

Part two moves forward chronologically into the nineteenth century, examining more forthrightly mass-produced commodities. The authors of these three essays—Pierre-Paul Zalio, Alessandro Stanziani and Martin Bruegel—demonstrate how new notions of quality, created by the multiple influences Stanziani evokes in his introduction, meshed with a growing market economy. Zalio takes as his case study the production of Marseille soap, a humble product that has nonetheless “une vie tumultueuse” (93). He shows how the considerable changes in the production and marketing of soap across the nineteenth century created a need to distinguish the product from Marseille by quality in the face of competition. Stanziani’s and Bruegel’s articles both look at agricultural products transformed by human art into wine and canned preserves. These choices introduce another facet into the understanding of quality, namely how the vagaries of nature enter into both the production process and the construction of notions of quality. Here the role of science is central to showing how new techniques and understandings of food chemistry emerged in the nineteenth century to control the variations in natural commodities. Stanziani’s examination of wine is particularly nuanced given the ways winemakers sought to emphasize and differentiate their products based on a hierarchy of quality, expressed in the 1855 classification designating official ranks of wines based on reputation.

The second group of essays, with its emphasis on multiple sources of classification and rapid change in perception and production of various commodities, highlights the transition from an Old Regime economy of ‘dirigism’ and a twentieth-century economy dominated by economic liberalism and belief in the invisible hand of the market. What the case studies demonstrate is how that transition was negotiated and adapted to the particular landscape of the French economy. This represents another rejection of classical liberal economics in that the success of liberalism neither was a preordained outcome nor did it follow a predictable path. Rather, the success of the free-market system in the twentieth century was the product of a particular historical, social and economic context.

The four essays in section three address twentieth-century economic concerns and show how norms, particularly legal norms, shaped the emergence of a liberal economic framework. Christian Bessy looks at the workings of public auctions and the crucial role appraisers play in such venues. Bessy sees these figures as mediating potentially conflicting interests and

enforcing regulations overseeing public sales. Here the appraisers' judgment of an item's authenticity and value is key to how potential sellers estimate its quality and ultimately its price. In Jérôme Bourdieu's study of the mad cow crisis, official expertise and government norms plays a similarly central role in assuring consumers of the quality, and safety, of beef. In this instance, however, Bourdieu shows how in a time of crisis "la définition des produits, la formation des prix, la manière dont sont organisés les échanges ne peuvent plus s'appuyer sur les règles établies antérieurement" (p. 195). Given this uncertainty in the market, consumer demands and concerns took a back seat to health and safety issues, managed for the most part by public authorities. The one group of consumers that did weigh in during this time were buyers for supermarkets who saw the chance to orient the market in beef toward new norms of quality, based in great measure on the pronouncements of medical experts.

Thierry Kirat and Évelyne Serverin both emphasize the importance of legal norms in shaping determinations of quality with essays that address the more abstract questions of who decides which products are safe and of high quality. Neither essay examines a particular product, as the other contributions do. Rather they look at the ways legal and governmental regulations shape production and perceptions. Kirat examines the American institutional system of quality control, showing how in the face of weak governmental institutions producers themselves created an effective set of guidelines for determining quality of products. Kirat effectively draws a comparison between the American and French approaches to this issue without drawing conclusions about which system is superior. Serverin examines similar questions in the French context, looking at how laws mandate product safety. She shows how in many instances an excess of legal regulations unnecessarily complicated decision-making for consumers. Focusing on food laws and labels, Serverin demonstrates how attempts to provide purchasers with information made it harder to judge quality. The unspoken assumption to be drawn from these two essays is that the more fluid situation of the nineteenth century, where no single voice was dominant but rather when varied groups and interests negotiated different ways of assessing quality, rather than leaving it all in the hands of laws and government regulations (*dirigisme*) or consumers and the market (the invisible hand).

This collection of essays includes two epilogues, by Robert Salais and Denis Woronoff. Taken by themselves, these two epilogues provide an excellent overview of economic theories and studies of perceptions of quality, including a discussion of theories of subjectivity and conventions. They adeptly pull together the themes of the preceding essays and place them in a broader disciplinary and theoretical conversation.

Drawing on the broad themes developed in the nine essays, both Salais and Woronoff drive home the ways that individual and collective negotiation generate the framework for assessing product quality. Salais shows how neither producers nor consumers can, on their own, assign quality to a product. Rather "la qualité d'un produit est une convention entre les acteurs qui se coordonnent autour de sa réalisation" (p. 289). Salais also astutely shows how examining this question in a broad historical context allows historians to reject the economically deterministic assumption that there is a direct line from the past to the future, a teleological assumption that economic developments follow an internal logic. Woronoff's epilogue emphasizes the importance of looking at the concrete dimensions of assessing quality at various moments. He underlines how distinct products, particular state regulations, and concrete production methods produced a subjective, and changing, understanding of quality. But an examination of the concrete products, markets and decisions involved in selling cloth, making soap and handling infected beef in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows how in fact different products, different industries and different moments produced varied responses to the common attempt to market goods. The emphasis on continuity and discontinuity in these essays nuances and grounds an understanding of economic activity in the past.

The collective insights of these essays point readers toward a more nuanced understanding of how involved parties made decisions about production, purchases and definitions of products. This challenge to, and corrective of, classic economic theory is enhanced by attention to change over time. But despite the attention to multi-causation, these essays does in some instances neglect to address the full role consumers play in markets. In particular, the concrete ways that shoppers made purchases is not always fully addressed. Nonetheless, this excellent collection shows how our understanding of how markets functioned in the past needs to pay attention to both objective and subjective elements of production and consumption. Historians, economists, legal scholars and sociologists will all find this volume absorbing, thought-provoking and indispensable to thinking about these issues.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Part One: “La construction de la qualité sous l’Ancien Régime”

Jean-Yves Grenier, “Une économie de l'identification ; Juste prix et ordre des marchandises dans l'Ancien Régime”

Liliane Hélaire-Pérez, “La négociation de la qualité dans les examens académiques d'inventions au XVIIIe siècle”

Philippe Minard, “Réputation, normes et qualité dans l'industrie textile française au XVIIIe siècle”

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Pierre-Paul Zalio, “Le ‘savon de Marseille’: Contribution à une sociologie économique des produits”

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Christian Bessy, “L'organisation des ventes publiques: Perception, qualification et espaces de circulation des objets”

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Thierry Kirat, “La responsabilité du fait des produits et l'appréhension judiciaire de la qualité des biens: Eléments sur le cas américain”

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Janine Marie Lanza
Wayne State University
jmlanza@wayne.edu

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