
H-France Review Vol. 14 (October 2014), No. 161

Nicholas Marty, *L'invention de l'eau embouteillée; Qualités, norms et marchés de l'eau en bouteille en Europe, XIX-XX siècles*. Brussels and New York: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2013. 397 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$61.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-3-0352-6359-6.

Review by Patrick Young, University of Massachusetts-Lowell.

The question of how once-rarefied products and practices came into common usage has been fundamental to the history of consumption, as that field has continued to develop over the last two or three decades. Seeking to explain the genesis of a European mass market for bottled water, the economic historian Nicolas Marty follows a trail from the mineral sources and luxury spas of the mid-nineteenth century into the new chains of production and distribution that made commercial water a *boisson industrielle* and ultimately a familiar item of everyday usage. Brands such as Vichy, Vittel, Evian, Perrier, Spa, Apollinaris, San Pellegrino, and Schweppes among others, in his telling, built their markets in line with constraints and opportunities arising from the differing regulatory norms established in European countries. In an account that encompasses shifts in business organization, techniques of production and packaging, medical and governmental intervention, and marketing practice, Marty sheds considerable light on the uneven and highly contingent process by which modern mass markets take hold.

The author's criticism of many existing economic histories of consumption, as set forth in the book's introduction, is that they have leaned too heavily upon supply-demand equilibrium as an explanation for market emergence. This can, in his view, result in an overly insular understanding of consumer goods and markets, in which they are made to seem the efficient and "natural" outcomes of choices made by autonomous market actors (pp. 11-12). He proposes alternatively in the book to analyze the social and historical construction of markets, and more specifically how a great range of actors--not only producers and consumers, but also scientists, doctors and pharmacists, producer and professional associations, commercial distributors and public officials--negotiated the technical and sanitary norms that provided definition to bottled water as a commercial food. His core concern lies in how the overall quality, and the more particular qualities, of these products were designated within the law and commercial practice, and thereby informed the perceptions and behaviors of consumers.

The study's geographic scope is notably ambitious. Because of France's leading role in the development of the bottled water industry, Marty understandably foregrounds it in his research and analysis. Yet his book is every bit a comparative history, based in an impressive reading of archival and print sources in multiple languages, and including all of the major western and southern European players within the water industry (France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom). As he shows, these countries adopted a range of approaches to defining and designating these new products within their respective national markets. Understanding how bottled water was differently regulated provides, in his view, the clearest insight into the larger process by which bottled waters gradually earned the recognition and acceptance of European consumers. Thus was it by no means accidental or even paradoxical that those countries with the most developed regulatory regimes (France, above all) experienced the most significant market growth for bottled water. The enunciation of clear standards of product quality and hygiene nurtured confidence in the product category of "mineral water," as too in the relationship of buyer and seller.

Marty adopts a tripartite chronological organization for his history. The first and most formative period he considers runs from roughly the middle of the nineteenth century through 1914, when commercialized bottled water first made its appearance within the European marketplace. Hitherto produced and consumed exclusively at thermal stations, mineral water attracted the interest of both thermal and non-thermal *sociétés* as an object of potentially wider commercial diffusion. Two main types of bottled water entered into circulation, “natural” mineral waters taken directly from recognized mineral springs and deemed to have specified therapeutic properties; and the more ordinary or “artificial” waters such as *eaux gazeuses*, treated with chemical or flavor additives to produce beverages of broader public appeal. The appearance of these new products raised an array of questions for European governments, like whether they were to be treated as medicine or as food in the domains of regulation, taxation and hygienic oversight; and how the public need for information and protection—the “consumer” as such did not yet really exist—was to be squared with the liberal desire to foster commercial opportunity and growth.

What Marty terms the “Latin” approach, embraced principally by France, as well by Spain and eventually Italy and other countries, was to distinguish clearly between mineral and artificial waters, and to maintain a relatively exacting system of authorization and oversight to safeguard standards of quality and hygiene within the marketplace. Other countries such as Belgium, Germany and the U.K. by contrast defined the category of mineral water more loosely, allowing greater room for the autonomous formation of a market for water products, and for the negotiation of norms and standards within that market. The awakening of concerns around industrial hygiene, product integrity/adulteration and commercial fraud at the turn of the century provoked greater intervention on the part of both public and private actors, as industrial chains of production and distribution dramatically increased the actors and risks involved in bringing bottled water to market. While it unfolded differently across Europe, such negotiation of the relationship between markets and norms was, in Marty’s view, vital in shaping confidence and patterns of purchase on the part of consumers during this, as well as subsequent stages of market development.

The period prior to World War I equally saw the earliest stirrings of a broader international marketing and exchange of bottled water products in Europe. Manufacturers and professional and regulatory bodies held the first international meetings to share scientific knowledge, forge common hygienic conventions, and reconcile national norms of production and regulation. Some producers also began to develop substantial export markets. Working around French regulatory strictures favoring established therapeutic mineral sources and waters, for example, Perrier effected fully 80 percent of its sales in the U.K. Indeed, the British market, as well as British technology and commercial capital, provided an important stimulus to the wider domestic and international merchandising of bottled water. On the whole, though, markets for commercial water remained localized and fragmentary, confined mainly to social elites and selected cities, and to areas in proximity to established mineral springs.

The succeeding period, running from the First through the Second World War, was one of significant contraction for European merchandising and consumption of bottled water. Like other economic sectors, bottled water suffered greatly under the combined impact of world war and sustained economic crisis, both of which effectively nullified international commercial exchange and compelled European governments to embrace new strategies of retrenchment and market intervention. Subjected to new price controls during the conflicts themselves, and thereafter taxed more freely to correct budgetary imbalances bred of wartime spending, producers of bottled water failed to recover the promising market share of the pre-1914 years. As late as 1950, the drinking of bottled water (whether mineral or artificial) was still something associated with a narrow and relatively privileged clientele, with localized markets, and with special occasions and seasons of the year.

It was only in the final juncture of Marty's study, encompassing the post-World War II era that a second growth in the diffusion of bottled water made it an article of mass consumption and more or less everyday usage. Although there continued to be wide disparities in consumption levels within and between individual countries, overall per capita European intake of bottled water increased from five to nearly 100 liters/year over the four decades following the war's close. Revealingly for Marty, this growth in consumption took root precisely as ingrained concerns over the quality and safety of tap water were tending to abate, suggesting a strong foundation for adaptation of the product to changing market conditions. The general postwar elevation of *niveaux de vie* and household consumption clearly helped create new market space for bottled water, as did the popularization of consumerist conceptions of bodily health, comfort and well-being. Marty also shows how technical innovation within the industry—the introduction of plastic bottles above all, though also new forms of automated production—continued to propel market expansion, as did the affirmation and in some cases revision of regulatory norms. The broad European tendency in this period (with notable exceptions) was toward a unification and even homogenization of national markets for bottled water; and also toward greater concentration of capital and production within the industry itself, favoring larger producers and driving many smaller brands out of the market entirely.

The project of European integration, as Marty shows in a separate chapter, gave rise to a more concerted effort to bring different state regulatory norms into alignment. What eventually emerged from the complex and protracted negotiations over *l'harmonisation* was a set of E.C. norms based in significant measure on the Latin model, one which recognized the specificity of mineral waters and enforced measures of hygienic surveillance already in place in France and several other countries. While there has still not emerged a truly integrated European market for bottled water, Marty suggests that the continued growth in the consumption of bottled water confirms the vital role of regulatory norms in winning the broad confidence of consumers in the product.

Marty's approach is one that contributes significantly to the *histoire d'alimentation*, as well as to the history of consumption more generally, by producing not merely another account of the inexorable diffusion downward of consumer taste, but rather a more encompassing consideration of the normative parameters within which markets take root (or don't). The author does leave some room to question whether his sometimes-minute analytical emphasis of regulatory dilemmas in fact fully illuminates why and how Europeans and others came to embrace bottled water as a necessary good. Scholars grounded in the social and cultural history of consumption for example may find themselves asking whether the author ultimately delivers on his promise to consider consumers as social actors, rather than as largely faceless or passive respondents to market initiatives. Marty is clearly most comfortable when discussing the often intricate technical, legal and administrative dimensions of his subject. His treatment of consumers, publicity and the changing nature of the *offre* can, by contrast, feel more tentative and even cursory at times. There is perhaps too sinuous an extrapolation from productive and regulatory conditions to market outcomes, with insufficient regard given to the agency of consumers or to the complexity and contingency of consumer choice. Beyond the rather general invocation of changing *modes* or *niveaux de vie*, Marty doesn't venture much explanation for how consumption of bottled water expressed social meaning and value, whether within publicity texts or on the part of consumers themselves. What he does say about market differentiation and consumer choice is certainly germane, particularly with respect to the sometimes-contradictory ways in which consumption of bottled water correlated with other kinds of drinking, whether of alcoholic beverages, tea and coffee, or newer sugar-based soft drinks.

One can, as a reader, question as well whether Marty draws out as fully as he might have some of the larger questions and implications that follow from his findings. He notably refrains in the final pages of the book from suggesting affinities between the case of bottled water and other commodities, citing the uniqueness of the former in its status as a hybrid therapeutic/alimentary product. As valid as such caution may be, there is clearly much interesting and instructive overlap between the history he

recounts and the histories of (for example) wine, cheese and other agricultural commodities. One thrust of the large, and still-burgeoning body of work dedicated to these subjects has been to identify a characteristic set of French objectives and concerns animating efforts to inscribe product distinctions and quality standards into the law.^[1] Whether in the legislation governing mineral sources, or in the negotiation of A.O.C. designations and trade exceptions, there lurks an abiding fear of product and of taste homogeneity that commercialization seems to portend and a countervailing faith in the corrective potential of formal definitions and distinctions of value. Across the twentieth century and into current time, there has clearly been a strong and consistent French impulse to affirm product and place integrity as integral to the expansion of commercial exchange, whether in the French, European or global marketplace.

A robustly transnational and even post-national perspective on consumption--of the sort Marty at least initiates in his book--can provide needed context for the core quandaries of market society in the twenty-first century. As Marty more suggests than demonstrates, the story of bottled water is ultimately and inescapably a global one, as popular consumption of bottled water moved well beyond Europe, establishing a foothold in the United States and Japan in the 1970s and throughout the world over the decades thereafter. The earlier colonial and post-colonial contexts for this global diffusion are in need of further elucidation, especially given suggestive recent work on French colonial spas and regimes of bodily health, hygiene and consumption under imperialism, among other kindred subjects.^[2] There is more to be learned too about how specific commodities like bottled water have historically bridged local, national and global spaces, for example by effectively registering rootedness in place and soil in very market-fluent ways.^[3] Marty's history will surely also prompt questions and considerations of a more ecological nature, even as that aspect of his subject does not receive treatment in the book, apart from passing reference to debates over bottle loss and disposal that arose from the awakened environmental consciousness of the 1970s (pp. 299-303). Yet the dark irony is hard to miss: from connoting salubrity, leisure and distinction in the nineteenth century, bottled water is in our own time as likely to trigger associations of industrial waste, and global resource disparity and depletion. How modern societies have, and will in the future, relate to water is perhaps the larger and more treacherous question at play in this history.

NOTES

[1] The history of wine and wine consumption has been a particularly prodigious field. See for example older, classic works such as Robert Dion, *La Création du vignoble bordelais* (1952) and *Histoire de la vigne et du vin en France des origines au XIXième siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1959); and more recent treatments such as Marcel Lachiver, *Vins, vignes, vigneron. Histoire du vignoble français* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), Gilbert Garrier, *Histoire sociale et culturelle du vin* (Paris: Larousse-Bordas, 1998), and Jean-Robert Pitte, *Bordeaux/Burgundy: A Vintage Rivalry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: The University of California Press, 2008).

[2] See for example Eric Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology and French Colonial Spas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).

[3] Along these lines, see for example Elizabeth Barham, "Translating Terroir: The Global Challenge of French AOC labeling" *Journal of Rural Studies* 19(2003): 127-138, esp. 136.

Patrick Young
University of Massachusetts-Lowell
patrick_young@uml.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172