
H-France Review Vol. 22 (October 2022), No. 180

Stefano Magagnoli and Philippe Meyzie, eds., *Réputation et marché. Produits, origines et marques: Perspectives historiques*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2022. 304 pp. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7574-3560-1.

Review by Kolleen M. Guy, Duke Kunshan University.

The reputation of a company or a product has come to be seen as an asset (or liability) in the global marketplace. Whether a luxury product or a product destined for mass consumption, it is a given that a strong, positive reputation can attract customers and influence price and profit. Reputable products are often perceived as providing more value and higher quality, resulting in greater customer loyalty and value-added pricing. How have we arrived at a point where, according to the *Harvard Business Review*, an estimated “70% to 80% of market value comes from hard-to-assess intangible assets such as brand equity, intellectual capital, and goodwill”?[1]

This collection of essays directed by Stefano Magagnoli and Philippe Meyzie sets out to place our current market reality into historical perspective. The volume editors and authors highlight various case studies of European products that developed these “intangible assets.” To make visible what has come to be largely invisible in our media-saturated consumer marketplace, the editors focus on three key themes: the value of reputation, the alchemy of linking reputation with quality and taste, and the challenge of preserving a reputation once achieved. While these three themes may appear self-evident today, the volume offers a unique contribution by expanding our temporal field of inquiry. Starting in the Middle Ages and reaching toward our present moment, the essays collectively reveal how reputation and *marques* (meaning both collective trademarks and brands) evolved and functioned across historical eras with shifting legal and economic regimes.

Two compelling conclusions emerge. The first is that reputation and trademarks served to reduce uncertainty and insecurity that consumers faced when dealing with producers across distance. We might assume that global markets with their ever-elongating supply chains make brands and trademarks more essential for trust today than in the distant past. But what strikes the reader when looking critically over the long expanse of time covered in this volume is that, for many consumers prior to the transport revolution in the late nineteenth century, the distance that a bottle of champagne had to travel between Reims, France and St. Petersburg, Russia seemed as much an unimaginable gap between producer and consumer as today's distance between an Apple iPhone produced in Guangzhou, China and a consumer in Bahia, Brazil. Consumers could bridge the gap through flows of information, of course, but, as the editors hint intriguingly in the conclusion, they also filled in the gaps of unknowing through storytelling and emotion, through attachments and traditions.

It is the constructed nature of reputation, quality, and taste that forms the second key conclusion from this volume. The authors interrogate the nature of reputation over time demonstrating that reputation has always been a result of a continuous process of creation, affirmation, defense, and re-invention. A face-to-face purchase through a friendly wine merchant in the past or the employee at the Apple “Genius Bar” in the present is initiated because of the reputation of brand names and belief in the ultimate quality of the final product. But, as the wine houses of France know as well as the Apple executives, a positive reputation is not fixed. One constant over time is that a positive reputation, particularly one that links to quality and taste, takes longer to develop than a negative reputation. Even today, in an era where time seems accelerated by digital media, this alchemy of reputation remains.

Figuring prominently in this collection are French products, particularly food products. Often the discussion of French food and reputations is a story of luxury and quality. Here, the editors provide a much-needed corrective to the triumphal narrative by including nuanced case studies of both French reputational successes and failures. There is a wonderful essay by Sylvie Vabre, for example, that traces the reputation of Roquefort cheese from the Middle Ages. She approaches reputation as a “mode of communication” about what constitutes “authenticity” and “imitation” (p. 51). What she demonstrates is how “imitation” products that copy production techniques or taste profiles serve as an external pressure on producers. The reaction to this pressure can help the industry to refine standards and taste profiles, to define what constitutes “authentic” techniques and geographic specificity. Her work suggests some intriguing new possibilities that emerge if we approach imitations as a crucial part of reputation creation. Likewise, the essay by Jean-Pierre Williot on the SNCF sandwich shows how a negative reputation, once established, is hard to dislodge. Despite regular interventions to improve both the quality and the reputation through innovations such as “le sandwich club,” this essay demonstrates the ways that a bad reputation can become an enduring pejorative stereotype. These two essays encourage us to move away from the usual success stories to revisit the meaning of imitation and what it means to have a “failed” reputation.

There were two essays in this volume that captured my attention because they suggest new research avenues using methods in the digital humanities. There are numerous studies that demonstrate how France and Paris, in particular, have come to be associated with luxury and quality. Indeed, several essays in this volume show how products, like French wines, acquired distinction beginning in the seventeenth century that created a collective reputation based in a place of production. The power of a “made in France” label was the result of more than marketing. It was also the result of communicating through a shared language that was amplified through multiple voices and vectors. In her essay on the emergence of “made in France,” Natacha Coquery shows how fervent mercantilists and ministers promoted the idea that products and brands should be seen as public goods. Print journalism picked up on this language and amplified it. As more of this print media such as *La Gazette du Commerce* becomes available in machine-readable digitized formats, it is easier to analyze the choice of language and frequency of words over time. We can track, for example, the rise of use of moral language—bad faith or fair price—among consumers. Or we can see how publicity around Parisian products features key words of refinement—beauty, elegance, good taste, tasteful, richness—that are amplified in repetition. Similarly, in an essay on commercial education in Portugal, Carmen Soares shows how commerce textbooks shaped a collective language about Portuguese food products for students who would eventually work in trade and commerce of Portuguese products abroad. Essays such as these

point to the promise and possibility of using distant reading methods as more archival material is digitized.

The editors and contributors should be commended for bringing together a collection that points us in new directions both thematically and methodologically. I would like to suggest that the volume could be used in a variety of ways in the classroom. The two essays highlighted in the previous paragraph, for example, would be useful in teaching students about text analysis through distant reading. Essays on legal aspects of food quality and on regulatory environments might be useful in a course on the history and future of European Union legislation. And historians of food and wine have numerous articles to select in building a syllabus on taste, place, and quality.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Stefano Magagnoli et Philippe Meyzie, “La réputation: un objet historique à identifier”

I. La valeur de la réputation

Introduction

Mariasole Porpora, “It’s Easy To Say Quality: Legal Aspects of Food Quality”

Sylvie Vabre, “The Long Life of Roquefort’s Renown and its Markets: Continuity and Disruptions since the Middle Ages”

Carmen Soares, “Approaches in Commercial Education to the Reputation of Foodstuffs: Portugal in the 18th Century”

Jean-Pierre Williot, “Le sandwich SNCF’: entre utilité marchande et mauvaise réputation”

II. Réputation, qualité et goût

Introduction

Natacha Coquery, “Réputation, luxe et goût français au XVIII^e siècle: Les ressorts du made in France”

Jean-Pierre Garcia, Thomas Labbé and Guillaume Grillon, “La Bourgogne, terre des vins de terroir: construction et ressources d’une réputation”

Stéphanie Lachaud-Martin, “Les vins blancs doux et liquoreux du sud Gironde: la construction des réputations”

Nicolas Marty, “Building Reputation in Different Regulatory Environments: Bottled Mineral Water in 19th-Century Europe”

Peter Scholliers, “Maintenir sa réputation: Le pain de la coopérative socialiste Vooruit de Gand (1880-1914)”

III. Affirmer et préserver sa réputation

Introduction

Caroline Le Mao, “Construire la renommée des produits navals français à la fin du XVII^e siècle, une impossible quête?”

Pierrick Pourchasse, “La qualité des produits du nord au XVIII^e siècle, réalité ou stratégie commerciale”

Claudio Besana, “Un fromage particulier des Préalpes Orobiques, le gorgonzola, entre succès commercial, innovation et préservation d’une dénomination traditionnelle”

Corinne Marache, “Gastronomie et tourisme à l’origine de l’invention et de la réputation d’un produit de luxe: le caviar d’Aquitaine (XX^e-XXI^e siècles)”

Stefano Magagnoli et Philippe Meyzie, “Conclusion générale”

NOTE

[1] Robert G. Eccles, Scott C. Newquist, and Ronald W. Schatz, “Reputation and Its Risks,” *Harvard Business Review* 85 (2007): 104.

Kolleen M. Guy
Duke Kunshan University
kolleen.guy@dukekunshan.edu.cn

Copyright © 2022 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 redistribution/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 republication 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