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Research report

Defining food risks and food anxieties throughout history

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Abstract

Nowadays, safe food is at the centre of concern of governments, scientists and the public. This essay surveys the social implications of this concern, and particularly addresses the question how historical wisdom may contribute to present-day understanding of food scares. After reminding briefly of social implications of today's food fears, it presents three scholarly approaches to food crises and anxieties in the past (labelled ''teleological'' and ''contextual'', with a division of the latter into ''limited'' and ''broad''), and provides one example of a complex relationship between food and health in the past. The essay concludes that it is not only indispensable to conduct historical research to situate present-day developments with regard to legislation or consumers' reactions, but that it is also needed to acquire a sense of relativism with regard to present-day food safety, quality and scares.

Keywords: History; Food anxieties; Food crises; Health; Food quality

Food anxiety is of all times, but its cause, range, and effect differ widely between periods and regions. Historically, food anxiety relates to lack of food, inferior, infected or swindled foods, fraudulent weight, and food poisoning. Would the understanding about a far-remote or recent past inform about present-day food anxiety and the way today's society is coping with food crises? This straight-forward question was the starting point of the Summer University that was organised by the *Université François-Rabelais de Tours* and the *European Institute for the History and Cultures of Food* (IEHCA) in September 2007. This Institute, established in 2001, aims at promoting the interest in the history and culture of food, by bringing together various disciplines. It organises scientific meetings, publishes the review *Food & History* (2003), participates in a master programme, and sets up a library and on-line bibliography.[1] Its first Summer University (2003) presented the many disciplines (history, sociology, ethnology, archaeology, economics, geography, ecology, and literature) that study the history and culture of food. In 2007, the fifth Summer University added medicine and pathology to this list. This Special Section presents the summaries of the lectures of the 2007 session, under the editorship of Allen Grieco and myself.

Today's perilous food and anxieties

The 2007 theme was labelled, ''In corpore sano?'', questioning the relation between food, health and food fears in past and present. Needless to say that this is a hot topic that highly affects both the specialists and the wide public. Nowadays the latter seems to be informed without delay when a food safety problem is detected. The August 2007 Pirbright—incident (Surrey, UK) may serve as an illustration, widely covered by the European media with, for example, the poignant title ''Our meat comes with health scares'' (*Sunday Times*, 5 August 2007). The world has recently faced many food crises, and one needs only recall the 1990s mad-cows, dioxin or counterfeit-oil incidents, leading to the carnage of thousands of animals, destruction of food stocks, diminishing of (meat) consumption, financial debacles, political upheaval, and imaginative monitoring.

Adding to the atmosphere of such crises are radical changes over the last few years, which thoroughly influence the way that people conceive of food. These changes may be summarised by referring to the expansion of the food chain (auto-consumption *is* safe, but intermediaries lead to suspicion). Changes include the almost monopoly of supermarkets for food purchases, the pre-packed foods and the general diffusion of convenience food

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[1] See the Institute's website <http://www.iehca.eu/home.html> (mainly in French); full programmes, photos and lecturers of the Summer University are to be found at <http://www.iehca.eu/formation_04.html>.

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(take-away, ready-made meals, and fast-food shops), the weakening of traditional meal structure, and the corrosion of cooking skills. Food crises, thus, appear in a radically changing food environment (Kjaernes, Harvey, & Warde, 2007: 2–3). Media attention about acute food crises strikes the public's imagination, leading to vehement sentiments of insecurity, anguish and occasionally panic. These sentiments, in turn, lead to eating behaviour that involves (rather harmless) vivacious food sensitivity (e.g., search for organic, authentic or *light* foods), as well as to (very harmful) binge eating, obesity and anorexia.

The bio-medical sciences pay massive attention to acute food crises. A search via *PubMed* reveals for example that ''BSE'' appears 2373 and ''foot-and-mouth disease'' 5203 times in articles published in medical journals around the world.[2] In 2006 *Appetite* paid special attention to BSE, addressing the broad societal dimension (Halkier & Holm, 2006). In recent articles in *Appetite* ''fear'' appears 13, ''trust'' 21, ''safety'' 29, ''quality'' 58, and ''risk'' 78 times as keywords. Social researchers have widely studied the effects of chronic and acute food insecurities, with particular interest in consumers' behaviour, and considered groups of ''vulnerable'' people (e.g., children), specific foods, social differences, and policy. New concepts have been launched, such as ''amplification of risk'' and ''news spirals'' (related to the role of the media) or ''risk generator'' and ''risk regulator'' (related to the origin and monitoring of food scares) (Lobb, 2005).

Almost thirty years ago, a ''bio-cultural crisis'' of modern Western foodways was highlighted when people started to question the origin and quality of their food (Fischler, 1979). Accepting the validity of the saying ''you are what you eat'', Claude Fischler connected this agro-medical crisis to social-cultural issues of people's identity: if one is doubtful about what one is eating, what does this do, then, to his/her sense of self and identity? Such linking of the agro-medical to the social instigated a gigantic pile of literature about the relationship between food, health and food scares, addressing *social* and *cultural* problems of obesity, cardiac disorders and other diseases related to affluent food (e.g., Maurer & Sobal, 1999).

Weight of the past

For most people during most of history affluent food was lacking. Received wisdom takes it that pre-1950 food risks and food anxieties relate primarily to quantity, and conversely, that today's foodways put new, qualitative problems (e.g., Kjaernes et al., 2007: 4, 9). Such partition, however, is wrong, for both quantitative and qualitative problems have always merged (Ferrières, 2005). Beyond doubt, throughout history the first food concern was about shortages, skyrocketing prices, dishonest weight, hoarding, and famines. Lack of food in a particular place and time leads to black markets, rising social inequality, exclusive status of specific food, hunger, adjusted social policies, panic, and numerous health problems with both short-term and long-term consequences (for example, increasing mortality, migration; impact on average stature and life expectancy). This quantitative anxiety has been studied widely in the 1960s and 1970s, with less interest in the 1980s and early 1990s, but revived attention since about 1995. A broad historical overview is offered by Newman (1995), while Fogel (2004) presents a rather optimistic view on (world) hunger since 1700, and 'O Grada (2005) studies famines and prices in pre-industrial Europe.

This research ties in with traditional economic historiography in that it pays attention to markets, policies, (cost of) kilocalories, health consequences, and consumers' responses in terms of survival tactics (migration, substitution of foods, adjustment of family spending). Qualitative food problems are hardly dealt with. These appear in historical studies of swindled, poisoned or unfit food. Cheating with food is of all times, but research of this phenomenon is rather recent. This may be explained by the subject's fogginess (in contrast to the high visibility – for both contemporaries and source-seeking historians – of quantitative food problems). Hence, information about food adulteration was to be gathered from very diverse origins. In his pioneering article, Aron (1975) could not refer to older historians' work, but he did to Emile Zola's *Ventre de Paris* and work on food fraud of that period.

Except for some scattered studies that appeared up to 1980 and rather marginal attention in specialised historical work, interest in past food adulterations emerged in the 1980s (Covello & Mumpower, 1985), to spread in the 1990s. This is linked to food scandals of the day (as stressed by Darquenne, 1984), and the increased general interest in cultural food studies. Broadly, a rudimentary division may be made between teleological and contextual studies. Teleological, here, means that very often a chronological inventory of food regulations is presented with references to general history, but focussing on present-day legislation and scientific knowledge. Regularly, books appear on the occasion of an anniversary of a first nation-wide law (e.g., Centenaire, 2005; Paulus, 1974), or as evidence of scientific progress (e.g., Gratzer, 2007; Jas, 2001). Such books provide basic information with legalistic and bio-medical insights of great value (sometimes anecdotic, sometimes dreary), but they commonly lack of a core research question or theoretical approach.

With regard to contextual research a rudimentary division may be made between, on the one hand, researchers who sketch the historical context, consider specific questions, and pay most attention to scientific progress in food safety, and, on the other, historians who situate their research in well-defined, broad developments. For the former, the history of vitamins, contaminated meat or nation-wide regulations primarily means a linear narrative from ignorance to enlightenment. Such studies largely end up as proficiently commented chronologies of inventions and innovations (e.g. Hietala, 1994; Teuteberg, 2000). This research explores a fallow field, from which the next generation of social researchers benefited highly.

Recent work shows that present-day regulations and norms with regard to safe food result from developments that are the

[2] http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez?db=PubMed (accessed: 18 August 2007).