

## RESEARCH IN ECONOMICS AND RURAL SOCIOLOGY

### FOOD RISK FACING CONSUMERS

*In the current context of health crises, many economic and social sciences studies have tried to describe and analyse consumer behaviour related to food risk. These studies share two premises: they consider the act of consuming as an individual behaviour and credit consumers with “risk perceptions” which direct their choice. A criticism of both axioms leads us to the question of the specificity of food risk and its political and social dimensions.*

“Psychosis”, “hysteria among consumers”, “eaters’ anxiety”: when food risk and consumers are simultaneously mentioned, such psychologising qualifications often arise. But what do scientists, journalists, elected representatives and food-processing professionals blame consumers for? They stop eating beef, they avoid unpasteurised cheese, they are reluctant to buy chicken or reject GMOs, all of which are quite irrational practices to speakers who lament the economical damage resulting from such behaviour (job losses, firms closing down). It is true that for the last fifteen years, several food-processing sectors have been marked by the emergence of health issues about their products: eggs and salmonella, listeria in cheese and tinned food, prions and beef, dioxin and chicken, beverages and digestive disorders.

The large amount of publicity given to these matters by parliament inquiries, legal complaints and major media coverage has not left social and economic researchers indifferent. Many studies in economic and social sciences have tried to describe and analyse not only consumption phenomena but also the emergence of food risks, scientific methods of research and expertise, forms of political handling, implementation of public policies. By considering only the direct studies on consumption, we will emphasize two central characteristics shared by the great majority of works: they consider the act of consuming food as an individual behaviour, and credit consumers with “risk perceptions” directing their choice. A critical view of these works is proposed here, highlighting the social and political dimension of the described phenomena.

#### **Where consumers are not irrational**

Food unfit for consumption can be detected in a tangible way: through its direct examination which reveals visible moulds, the smell of putrefaction and unusual tastes – or by packaging signs such as expiration dates or chips showing the cold chain was not thoroughly enforced. This is not the case of health issues that have been the subject of crises and

for which all the protagonists agree on the imperceptible character of the supposed or real danger: prions are not visible, *listeria monocytogenes* do not smell. And yet, in their reasoning, most scientists include the concept of consumers’ “risk perception” while they exclude all direct or reported sensorial experiment on the matters. How can we interpret such a paradox?

“Risk perception” studies in fact consist of an analysis of closely-linked food representations and threats. This gap is not only lexical but chiefly semantic: while agreements on percepts are made possible by sharing them, internalised representations may greatly differ from an individual to another. Although it is quite easy for us to agree that a wine is corky or a meat is high, it is more difficult to be unanimous in thinking that GMOs are harmless or unpasteurized cheeses are dangerous. It is precisely this variability that focuses the interest of researchers who describe it and try to analyse its determiners.

For economists, these representations are generally modelled in the form of a series of preferences which, for example, enable to link health care, food tastes and willingness to pay. In this framework, no cognitive or moral value is given to consumers’ representations since this paradigm brings the question of the act of consuming down to the decision on product choice. On the other hand, the majority of anthropological studies try to explain the gap existing between acts of consumption and empirical data from epidemiological or demographical studies or data from laboratory sciences. These analyses presuppose that consumers are in the grip of their “perceptions”, considerably disconnected from the real world. According to these analyses, consumers think food is less secure than in bygone days while historical data proves the constant increase in life expectancy: they think that the food irradiation technique is dangerous whereas it ensures safer food...

Three criticisms are made by the work of sociologists to this hierarchy of cognitive and often moral representations. First of all, the representations of consumers and scientists are not necessarily dissonant, at least if the former are collected using open devices, whether they are political in nature (citizens conference) or scientific (focus groups, interviews), and then appear in a complex and argued form, as shown in the GMO case. It is true that in these circumstances, a consumer is no longer considered as such, but as a citizen, as a neighbour or as a person in all his or her dimensions. The taking into account of clues or alerts putting forward the danger of food can be treated as a manifestation of people's ordinary vigilance, instead of making it seem irrational. Lastly, faced with the notion of consumers' "collective psychosis", it can be answered that if they modify their food practices, they are merely following authorized voices which give them on the one hand the description of dangers and threats, and on the other hand the adopted control measures, often in emergency and sometimes in confusion.

### **Where consumers are also social beings**

It is a fact that a crisis is generally attested by a withdrawal, limitation or banning measure, most often taken by public authorities, sometimes by private firms: banning of Vacherin-Mont d'Or type cheese by the Swiss authorities (1987), embargo on British beef by several European countries (1996), suspension of four antibiotics used as growth factors in rearing by the European Commission (1997), withdrawal of Belgian Coca-Cola tins, withdrawal of beef from numerous school canteens in Great Britain (1990) and France (2000). But it can also emerge from public statements by experts, associations or political representatives behaving as alarm raisers: a French consumer association calling for the boycotting of "hormone-fed veal" (1980), a British Health minister reporting that eggs were heavily infected by salmonella (1988), British scientists assessing that beef was not safe and that, as a consequence, they would not eat any more (1995). Media coverage alone is not sufficient, it needs to be sponsored by authority or testimony in order to have a lasting influence on consumption.

Following these reports and measures, if consumption collapses, it is quickly brought to the fore by inter-professional players (Ofival, Cidil, etc.), market research firms (Sofres, Secodip, etc.) or public authorities. Summarized as "Product X:-Y% consumption", this result is often the point of reference for economic literature to set the "consumer demand" variable. In accordance with developed models, it results from the aggregation of unitary demands (household or individual) faced with an offer, and will be treated as reactions to the information on risk, taking into account consumer preferences.

By criticizing this type of model, sociological research has showed the essential role played by middlemen in building markets, whether this means jobs, consumption goods or food. This role is not limited to the adoption of a function enabling production, dissemination or exchange; it makes middlemen the true actors in the formation of the consumer, especially by creating management and marketing techniques and implementing market finalizing devices. By following this line of reasoning, it is possible to affirm that the drops in consumption reported by professional players

reflect very different situations from a social and political point of view, and cannot be treated as being merely a "fall in household demand", the distribution of which should be studied.

In the first place, the direct crisis effect is an almost total collapse in export sales, in some circumstances to third-party countries, in others to European Union member states. In the second place, the effect is wide-ranging in the fields of out-of-home catering which anticipate the supposed consumer demands or are in a position of liability, as in the example of local representatives modifying the content of school canteen menus. It is only in the third place that we find "ordinary consumers", whose variation in consumption will be lower than the global percentage. Inside this same category, consumption for oneself and for dependants should be distinguished, especially children.. In spring 1996, nursery schools suppressed beef from their menus to a greater extent than elderly homes (figure 1), and some households chose to keep on eating beef while they removed it from their children's meals.

We thus get a totally different consumption picture, with a gradient fall which is certainly describable in the form of individualised preference or the "perception" model, but an analysis based on differentiated socio-political roles proves to be more satisfactory. The more the "consumer" acts in someone else's name, the greater the drop, an attractive suggestion which reminds us of the social and political dimensions - and not simply the economic ones - of food consumption. A similar situation is when Health authorities develop targeted campaigns in order to reduce listeriosis.

### **Where consumption goes beyond the act of purchasing**

By emphasizing the political and social dimensions of the relationship with food, we are led to re-read the literature: to what extent may food be considered as a specific field? On this point, a clear difference stands between economics and social sciences research. By modelling independently from the considered product, some economists consider smoking or "risky" leisure activities in exactly the same way as food consumption, whether data is produced by economic experimental methods or extracted from consumption databases. On the other hand, most sociological, historical and anthropological works grant several specificities to the food sector.

First of all, researchers give great importance to the cultural, historical and regional roots of numerous food products (wine, meat, cereals, cheese). Next, they remind us of the eminent bodily dimension of eating; ingestion is not merely a biological phenomenon but includes a paramount symbolic dimension. Lastly, they note the progressive distance between consumers' idealised representations and the reality of agro-food production processes due to massive urbanisation. The cultural weight of food, the contamination of the body by the impurity of what is ingested, and the discovery of "unnatural" practices would play an essential explanatory role in the increase in food crises in western countries these past twenty years.

If the economic approach may be criticized for its standardisation of practices and representations, the strictly anthropological option creates, *de facto*, a situation of

incomparability between food consumption and health products consumption (substitution hormonal and cancer treatments, hospitalisation and nosocomial illnesses, vaccination and auto-immune illnesses), drugs (tobacco, cannabis...) or other forms of risky consumption (mobile phones and health disorders caused by microwaves, musical establishments and hearing loss, transportation means and deaths), other than in the form of “risk barometers”, obtained by opinion polls.

Yet a large number of crises have also appeared in fields where explanatory factors are not necessarily the ones given for food. This is the reason why these comparisons are indispensable if we want the transformations underway in each crisis to be understood, without any *a priori*, and the specificities of the food field to be analysed. Similar mechanisms are observed (importance of official statements

and measures, invention and transformation of devices), but also differences (consumption substitution patterns, forms of legal action).

Beyond the study of sudden drops in cumulated consumption and of the varying speed of return to a level comparable with the previous situation, some works underline the experience resulting from these crises: management of product withdrawals and information given to the public, attention to production conditions, to the construction of quality signs, new labelling, traceability, which fall within ordinary practice to a varying degree. By focusing on these devices, on their often transsectorial genesis, on the practical transformations they entail and the experience they generate, the study of consumption may become the starting point for a social and political analysis of food risks.

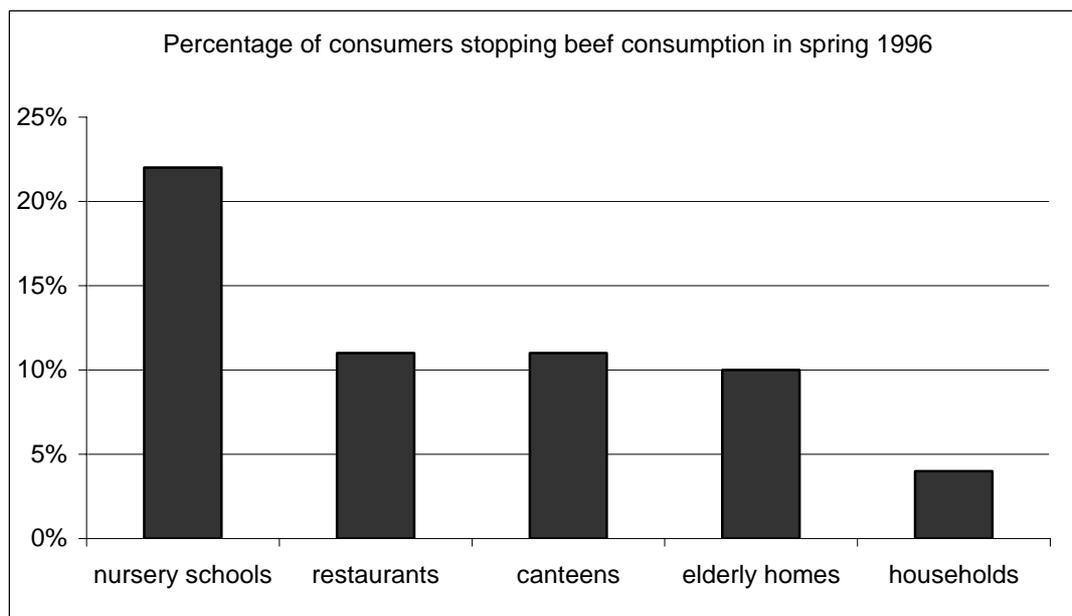
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#### For further information

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Sources: Secodip, Ministère de l'Agriculture

### Listeriosis and food consumption

The possibility of listeriosis occurring through food was first established for human beings in 1982. Following that identification, the search for food sources of infection (cooked pork meats, dairy products, seafood) and strain-typing in a National Reference Centre (NCR) enabled the identification of several epidemics by linking geographically dispersed cases and consequently produced alert messages. Thanks to this supervision work, to the enforcement of new standards and to routine control practices, the total incidence of cases decreased by a factor of 3 between 1987 and 1997, before the implementation of a compulsory declaration of cases in 1998.

Production factors thus have a major effect on risk, but greater attention to the distribution of cases also shows that targeted prevention policies played an important part by modifying food consumption by certain high-risk groups. Thus materno-foetal cases, a third of which were mortal, have dropped in large proportions, from about half the total incidence to less than a quarter. By producing specific recommendations on products and high-risk situations and by using the medical world as a supporting vector, health authorities have called for pregnant women to be vigilant without provoking a global stigmatisation of the types of targeted products.

Sources: National institute for health vigilance (NIHV), listeria NCR