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The socio-economic potential for peripheral rural regions of regional imagery and quality products

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Abstract

This paper originates from an EU-funded research project¹ whose objective is to conceptualise and to analyse the links between the use of regional imagery and the production and marketing of quality products and services in twelve peripheral rural regions of the EU. After establishing a conceptual framework which draws from various disciplinary perspectives, especially geography, economics and marketing, the paper bases its analysis on extensive empirical work which includes interview surveys of three groups of relevant actors in each study region : the producers of quality products, actual and potential consumers of such products, and relevant developmental and regulatory institutions.

Perceptions of quality and of regional imagery are compared both between, and within, these groups ; and the strategies available for strengthening these attributes, developing linkages between them, and exploiting them through the marketing of appropriate products are examined. While drawing on the experience of a variety of regional circumstances within Europe, the paper makes particular reference to the West Wales region where rapid institutional change and severe recession in the livestock industry highlight the importance for rural development purposes of moving from "commodity-based" to "value added" production against the background of a relatively weak regional image.

Keywords : rural development, quality products, niche markets, Wales

INTRODUCTION

The "rural" in society

Rural regions in today's Europe are characterised by three key features. Firstly, they are subject to processes which originate beyond the immediate locale (Lowe, 1996), and they respond in contrasting ways to the demands and opportunities facing them. Peripheral rural regions, usually characterised by unfavourable farm structures and relative economic isolation, are likely to respond less positively than more favoured regions, thereby becoming even more disadvantaged. Inter-linkage between the global and the local is particularly evident in the agricultural sector where local production of foods may be directly affected by global agreements and by global supply and demand trends (Marsden and al., 1990). Secondly, rural regions are increasingly characterised by diversity – in populations, economies and lifestyles. Rural regions are increasingly sites of new economic activities (e.g. tourism and recreation) as well as agricultural production, a "post-productivist" diversity that is the result of the in-migration of new people (Murdoch and Marsden, 1994) and policy encouragement. Thirdly, and most importantly in the context of this paper, rural regions are increasingly seen as both sites of consumption and as commodities in themselves. An increasingly key aim of rural policy is to satisfy public demand for high quality rural environments.

Endogenous rural development

In general terms, rural development thinking has shifted its focus in recent years from narrow economics (e.g. job creation or raising regional income) to more holistic concerns which see development as a process of improving the "total human condition" (Keane, 1990). One characteristic of this shift is the replacement of exogenous development dependent on external influence and investment by the encouragement of endogenous development strategies which emphasise the role of local people and institutions in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development programmes. Endogenous development has not proceeded without difficulty. Concentration on "the local" as a mobilising force brings the danger of ignoring wider structural issues such as the global processes mentioned above. Further, power over the definition and control of development may remain largely in the hands of authorities, and UK experience suggests that moves towards "partnership" approaches to rural development

are often *ad hoc*, co-existent with more traditional models of local action, and conditioned by the particular economic, institutional and socio-political context of localities. Development in Wales, for example, has been dominated by the actions of an array of quasi-autonomous agencies whose perceived lack of accountability has been the source of much political ill feeling.

Rural development policy and performance

Traditional policy and organisational responses to rural development problems have generally concentrated on improvements to physical infrastructure in rural areas, stimulation of business development and growth, diversification of the economic base, and attraction of inward investment. Even where such policies are construed as effective within an administrative region (e.g. in Wales), they may have the effect of further marginalising outlying and less favoured areas within that region (e.g. in West Wales). Concentrating development projects in and around large settlements, for example, is often incompatible with traditional patterns of dispersed settlement and may pull real or potential jobs away from peripheral areas.

Two fundamental issues can be identified with respect to rural development performance. Firstly, policy has traditionally been sectorally-driven and hence dominated by agricultural considerations. Despite initiatives stressing diversification and the production of environmental goods (Jenkins, 1990), and despite the apparent shift from productivist logic towards a "logic of quality" (Allaire and Sylvander, 1997), agricultural support has been overwhelmingly oriented towards productivism. This has resulted in intensification of production, specialisation at both regional and farm level in a diminished range of activity, growth in average farm size, reduction in the number of farms and farmers (Hughes and al., 1996), and inflated land prices. Together with a restrictive planning policy, this process has reduced the scope and motivation for diversification into non-agricultural activities. Pressure for reform of the sectoral approach to policy is often relatively recent: the 1996 White Paper on the Welsh Countryside stresses the need for more integrative policies and the development of partnerships; and increasingly important EU funding is beginning to encourage integrated and locally-led approaches to rural development. In contrast, development activities in Scotland have long been characterised by a mix of spatial and sectoral policy, the implementation of a mix

of bottom-up and top-down development policies (Hughes, 1992), and an increased awareness of the importance of integrated development.

The second issue in rural development performance is that of where resources should be focused – on problems or on opportunities. Arguably, the focus in Wales has consistently been on problems – of peripherality, poor infrastructure, agricultural decline, and the lack of an enterprise culture. In contrast, a focus on opportunities may mean more interest in the links between economic development on the one hand and the environment, cultural identity and language on the other; and heightened awareness of the globalisation of markets and increased market competition, and hence of the importance of marketing as a development tool. Again, the Scottish contrast is instructive – even the names of "Scottish Enterprise" and "Highlands and Islands Enterprise" seem ideologically linked to the exploitation of opportunities.

At EU level, the need for CAP spending reductions means strong policy support for productive diversification and away from productivism. Quality farm food marketing schemes have been suggested as instruments for long-term economic and environmental sustainability (Gill and Battershill, 1998; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998) and for the protection of local farming systems by developing consumer demand for regionally identifiable and quality-assured foods (Marsden, 1998). New directions for policy include measures which build on the existing skills, and resources locally available in rural areas and which encourage the development of markets based on demand for those resources.

Overview of the paper

How can a rural development process be envisaged that deals with these issues? One possibility is the development of approaches which encourage the establishment of regional imagery and the production and consumption of quality products based on local resources, through the development of niche markets. Against this background, the remainder of the paper is in five sections. Section 2 conceptualises the issues of regional imagery and quality production in rural development, drawing on a variety of sources. Sections 3 and 4 discuss the concepts of quality products and regional imagery which are then linked in section 5. Section 6 offers some conclusions for rural development strategy.

The paper is based on findings from a multi-disciplinary project entitled "Regional Imagery and the Promotion of Quality Products and Services in the Lagging Regions of the EU" (RIPPLE)² (Ilbery and al., 1999; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999b). The project focussed on 12 peripheral regions in 6 EU countries and on a limited number of quality products and services (QPS) in each region. Interview surveys were conducted of producers, consumers and institutions relating to the chosen QPS within each study region.

1. CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

The analysis of regional imagery and quality product promotion requires an appropriate underlying conceptualisation relevant to peripheral regions. The following draws on four main bodies of literature: marketing theory, regulation theory, actor network theory and consumption geographies.

1.1. Marketing

Marketing has long been a weakness in the rural development process, particularly in peripheral regions, because of the small scale of many individual producers and the undifferentiated nature of their products. Lack of concern with demand factors, lack of skills in product presentation, and limited development of marketing networks have all tended to lead to dependence by agriculturally-based peripheral rural areas on guaranteed markets and outside intermediaries. Yet, peripheral regions have resources of potential market value in a climate of rising incomes, nostalgia for rurality and homogenisation of production, as food markets become more differentiated on the basis of a range of socially-constructed quality criteria. Certain aspects of marketing are, therefore, potentially important in rural development. These include the marketing competence and strategies of producers; the market awareness and decisions of consumers; market structures and the marketing environment; and the role of institutions and policy in facilitating competitiveness (Jenkins and Parrott, 1997).

From a marketing perspective, "quality" refers to the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy needs (Kotler, 1997). It is a key to the creation of value and customer satisfaction, although the concept can vary between consumers, products and markets. Quality-specific

product differentiation can result from four processes (Jenkins and Parrott, 1997) :

- Certification by professional organisations, government, or other external bodies – e.g. "Appellations d'Origine Contrôlée" certifications and organic symbols ;
- Association – geographically with a region or locality (e.g. Normandy butter or Welsh lamb), historically with a tradition or culture (e.g. crafts using Welsh slate, or whisky using traditional Scottish production methods), or through product traceability (e.g. cheese from a particular farmhouse dairy) ;
- Specification – of production method (e.g. small-scale workshops or 'authentic' recipes), or of raw materials (e.g. local wool or water from a particular spring) ;
- The generation of attraction by tapping into the subliminal wants of consumers – e.g. fashionable craft designs or attractive food flavours.

Whatever the method used, the marketing objective is to generate a perception of quality which results in commercially significant differentiation in the eyes of consumers and commercially significant value-extraction on the part of producers.

An "image" in marketing terms refers to the set of beliefs, ideas and impressions held by a person about a product, and it comprises both rational and emotional elements (Graby, 1993). An effective image can benefit a product by defining its character and differentiating it from competitors, by delivering "emotional power" within potential buyers, and by establishing its value. Imagery concerns how reality is *perceived* rather than how it intrinsically *is*, and images have marketing consequences for market analysis (particularly with regard to consumer behaviour), marketing strategy (particularly with regard to product differentiation and positioning) and marketing programmes (particularly with regard to the appropriate marketing mix).

Quality and image are closely linked concepts in marketing. An image of product quality, or of a producer's concern for quality, can be created through the subtle use of the physical cues identified as relevant to consumers' judgement of quality. Quality can also be communicated through marketing elements such as premium pricing, packaging and the marketing channels used. Many speciality cheesemakers in Wales, for example, prefer delicatessen-type outlets to super-markets because of the aura of quality which they bring.

1.2. Regulation theory

Regulation theory allows theorisation of the broad institutional and economic processes which influence rural development. Its starting point is an analysis of how fundamental social relations are maintained in the face of the antagonisms that they produce. It is constructed around two key concepts : the *regime of accumulation* (the organisation of production, income distribution, exchange and consumption), and the *mode of regulation* (the institutional forms, procedures and habits which ensure that agents conform to its demands) (Murdoch, 1995 ; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999b). In relation to rural development, regulation theory views changes in global food systems in terms of progression through a series of food regimes (Fine, 1994 ; Goodman and Redclift, 1994). The current regime is characterised by the growth of trans-national food companies, reductions in government support for agriculture, and moves towards the liberalisation of agricultural trade ; but it is also associated with increased flexibility in production, and increasingly discerning consumers concerned about production methods, variety and food quality. These latter characteristics provide the impetus for the development of new activities in rural areas, such as farmhouse processing (e.g. the recent growth of speciality cheesemaking in Wales), an interest in filling market niches (e.g. those for organic products), and growth in the speciality food sector.

Regulation theory has been criticised for its structuralist and economic approach which ignores aspects such as cultural practices, social norms and non-dominant forms of accumulation, especially in peripheral regions (Flynn and Marsden, 1995). Responses to this critique have involved the adoption of a multi-layered concept of regulation (the "local modes of social regulation" – Clark and al., 1997) which focuses on the complex social relations between actors who operate at a variety of spatial scales with a variety of motives and values. Local places do not simply react to global forces, but are part of an "interactive" process in which local actions can have consequences at a wider scale. In this way, policies are influenced by local specificities which feed back into national and international regulation.

1.3. Actor-network theory

Whereas regulationist approaches adopt a structuralist framework by explaining new economic forms in terms of external economic, societal or structural pressures, network analysis adopts a more internalised approach,

viewing the economy as a "grid" of inter-relations between actors who define themselves and their interests in the context of relationships with others. Networks can be defined as consciously created and structured relationships with specific economic, social or political purposes ; and actor-network theory seeks to understand economic structures as the outcomes of active attempts to construct, impose and maintain such networks. An analysis of power, seen as the outcome of social processes and of collective action, is central to such analysis.

Actor-network theory has been applied to the analysis of change in the British countryside (Marsden and al., 1993). Actors are defined as the loci of decision and action, and distinctions are made between the *market arena* where actors as producers (e.g. producers of quality products) represent themselves economically, the *social arena* where actors as consumers (e.g. actual and potential consumers of quality products) represent themselves socially, and the *regulation arena* where institutional actors (e.g. organisations charged with promoting quality products) represent themselves politically. These processes of representation lead to various types of rurality being promoted, and the strength of representations depends on the power of the networks through which they are established. In turn, this depends on the economic, social and political positions of the actors involved and the nature of the relationships that they build. Institutional, regional and self-regulatory quality marks for food products are thereby seen as representations through which producers attempt to build networks with consumers and institutions with producers. The RIPPLE surveys showed that, within and between the relevant groups of actors involved with quality products, there exists a variety of actor networks – formal or informal, horizontal or vertical, ideological or commercial, and voluntary or enforced.

1.4. Consumption geographies

Consumption geographies explore the role of consumption in the construction, representation and experience of place. Consumption, particularly of food, is an important factor in the construction of place identity (Crang, 1996), and can be interpreted as a place-creating act (Sack, 1992) with social and cultural meanings (Marsden, 1996 ; Bell and Valentine, 1997). Consumer behaviour is of particular interest : with regard to food, many consumers are increasingly interested in, and knowledgeable about, its origins, the farming practices

involved, the processes through which food is transformed into consumer products, and food safety.

Consumption is increasingly conceptualised as a process intimately bound up with the construction of consumers' personal identities in terms of status and belonging (Giddens, 1991 ; Jackson and Thrift, 1995). Two main interpretations of the relationship between consumption practices and individual identity can be distinguished (Glennie and Thrift, 1996). The first stresses the process of *cultural fragmentation*, whose features include the disappearance of stable social markers (e.g. class or traditional gender roles), the challenge to tradition and ritual, and the disappearance of place-specificity in everyday life. Cultural fragmentation tends to empty objects of wider cultural meanings, suggesting that consumption is simply a utility-based process centred on individual identity. The second interpretation is that, through a process of *reflexive modernisation*, the human sense of self is deepening, and this opens up many positive as well as negative possibilities for social relations which can be reinforced by consumption. In place of earlier homogeneous class-centred constellations of consumers, the process produces social and market segmentation and many consumer sub-groups, features integral to increasingly reflexive contemporary societies. As a result of growing cognitive reflexivity, social relationships and consumption decisions rely less on the traditional social structures of class, family and mass production, and more on the increasing amounts of knowledge generated by a growing number of political, scientific and marketing institutions.³ Equally importantly, reflexivity is aesthetic and "aesthetic cultural capital" (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999b) is attached to consumption goods – especially food, which is central to the construction of "lifestyles" (Bell and Valentine, 1997).

Hence, taste, aesthetics, sensibility, personalisation of demand and quality are increasingly important to consumers at the expense of traditional features such as price and convenience. Such trends indicate a growing potential market for regional QPS which can be produced and marketed in a way which exploits the "cultural meanings" attached to their locations of origin.

1.5. Conceptual issues and the RIPPLE surveys

This conceptual framework was used for the RIPPLE surveys of producers, consumers and institutions (Jenkins and al., 1998 ; Parrott and al., 1999a ; Parrott

and al., 1999b). Ideas from the four conceptual areas outlined above were used to ensure theoretically informed questioning aimed at a better understanding of crucial themes. These include the marketing of QPS specifically from peripheral regions ; the links between national/international and local/regional modes of regulation and accumulation ; the links between geographies of production and consumption ; the significance of "the rural" as a site of consumption ; the ways in which meanings are constructed around particular products and places ; and the extent to which regional QPS contribute to endogenous development through the configuration of networks at local and extra-local levels.

Traditional marketing theory suggests that producers treat demand as "given", identify it through market research, and seek to satisfy it through appropriate production and marketing. Small QPS producers in peripheral regions, however, often lack local markets, are short of the resources and skills required to enter more distant markets, and have little flexibility in production. They need, therefore, alternative ways of representing themselves and their products in the market arena, and may use less formal methods to build networks based on trust, traceability and product quality. In fact, such network characteristics often offer a potential competitive advantage : the BSE affair, for example, damaged trust in conventional production and marketing patterns to the benefit of many traditional extensive livestock producers. The RIPPLE producer survey showed that alliances with other actors are largely through personalised relationships characterised by trust and traceability ; and that product quality is defined in terms of production method, raw materials and personal involvement rather than in terms of consumer perception or product promotion.

Consumer behaviour theory stresses the importance of the social arena and the construction of personal identities in terms of status and belonging, suggesting that consumer perspectives on QPS are not necessarily regionally-focused. Ethical demand in the form of organic or animal-friendly products, for example, is not territorially-delimited. However, a sizeable minority of consumers are interested in the processes involved in the food production and marketing chain, and the RIPPLE consumer survey showed that for many consumers traceability and freshness are of primary importance, as is support for the local economy : this effectively leads to demand for food with clear local or

regional origins. Trends within the social arena, therefore, suggest a strengthening of markets for regional QPS produced by identifiable small producers using traditional methods and inputs. In contrast, wider awareness of regional products appears strongly related to tourism and travel, suggesting that current developments in the leisure sector also contribute to a general strengthening of markets for regional QPS.

Institutions operate largely in the regulation arena, seeking to help producers in product marketing and to guarantee product quality to consumers. Institutional actors thus build networks by enrolling producers and consumers in the process of constructing quality and exploiting regional imagery. By involving geographical origin in product identity, they transform local knowledge into property that is exploitable by localities and their producers (Ray, 1998). However, the RIPPLE institutional survey showed this regulatory pattern to be characterised by conflict between institutions operating at different geographical scales. The EU's PDO/PGI regulations, for example, often conflict with national views which see national images as more powerful means to product differentiation than regional ones, and with local views which see individual producers' brands as more marketable than regional designations. The survey also confirmed the tendency for institutions to compete to enrol producers and consumers into networks ; and it showed that close formal co-operation between producers and institutions is rare, largely due to the wide range of institutional objectives and functions found within any single study region.

2. PRODUCT QUALITY

2.1. Definitions of quality

Quality can be both an objective attribute which can be externally verified, measured, controlled and replicated ; and a subjective experiential phenomenon which varies between individuals, regions and countries. Useful definitions of quality products must implicitly accept this potentially conflicting ambivalence (Sylvander, 1993). More precise definitions of quality vary by product : organic product quality, for example, is defined in terms of authenticity (guaranteed by the production processes), ethics (the result of environmentally-friendly production methods), and biological, sensorial and nutritional aspects (Vastoia, 1997). Quality of other food products is often associated with "traceability" which provides consumers with (often vague) guarantees of

quality. An essential feature of quality, whether it is communicated through a focus on management processes (e.g. through ISO standards), the products themselves (e.g. through eco-labelling), or marketing devices (e.g. high prices, attractive packaging or advertising), is that it is a "positional" characteristic. It positively differentiates products above norms or minimum standards in ways recognised by consumers, and is therefore able to command a market benefit, normally in the form of a price premium (Anon., 1993). Quality, therefore, can give competitive advantage to products, processes, producers or regions.

Going beyond a marketing perspective, the conceptualisation of food quality involves a number of considerations (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999a). Firstly, a product's quality is determined by the many-faceted interactions of all those involved in its realisation and appreciation – i.e. all the actors in the marketing chain from initial producer to final consumer, each of whom may entertain different perceptions of quality. Secondly, constructions of quality are dependent on the social, cultural, economic and political context in which they are determined. Thirdly, the concept of quality is dynamically (re-) negotiated among the actors involved. Powerful actors can potentially appropriate the concept for their own products to enhance their own market position: most quality assurance schemes, for example, are initiated and controlled by large corporate retailers (Fearne and Kuznetsov, 1994), and their terms (e.g. high levels of product hygiene and consistency) may be beyond the capabilities of many small producers.

2.2. Perceptions of quality

Although quality is constructed by numerous different actors, there has been little research into how it is perceived by them. Actor-network approaches suggest the inherently political nature of quality construction in a competitive market place, as with the French *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* laws under which prestigious winemaking regions have established a monopoly rent (Moran, 1993). The concept of quality can also be theorised as a representation through which producers, consumers and institutions attempt to establish and maintain stable alliances. The most stable alliances are likely when the concepts of quality held by each of these groups are in broad alignment. Successful marketing of QPS requires producer and institutional actors to align their representations as closely as possible with those of consumers, suggesting

the importance of market research, demand-led production, and targeted marketing.

The analysis of quality perception by *consumers* is rooted in psychology and psychometrics (Vastoia, 1997). The RIPPLE consumer survey showed that few consumers deny buying what they regard to be quality items, at least occasionally – an unsurprising finding, given that quality product consumption contributes to construction of personal identities. Manufacturers' brands and named retailers are the most important indicators of quality to consumers; whereas appearance, presentation, and specific regional provenance are less important. Clearly, trust plays a vital role here – specifically, trust in major manufacturers and retailers. Such trust is presumably based on the assumption that quality control is more effectively enforced within a hierarchical company than within a region of disparate and independent actors, and suggests the importance of traceability and official quality marks as quality indicators for regional products. However, a significant proportion of food consumers are less concerned with the most easily definable aspects of quality (such as official certification, geographical or cultural association, or specification of production method and raw materials) than with features such as freshness. Freshness in turn is often associated with local provenance, suggesting the importance of clearly defined networks involving local producers, intermediaries and consumers, possibly in the form of direct selling which recognises the importance of the social context of purchasing decisions.

The RIPPLE producer survey showed that *producers'* constructions of quality vary widely according to product. Many producers prefer objective notions of quality, related to animal husbandry (e.g. specific cattle breeds), production method (e.g. the use of raw milk for cheesemaking), or official certification (e.g. organic certification); while others stress subjective elements such as flavour (e.g. in speciality cheeses), product differentiation (e.g. niche marketing of small lambs), or product originality (e.g. in craft production). The extent to which such quality constructions align with those of consumers also varies widely. Objective constructions may align closely with the requirements of the major multiple retailers (e.g. for meat) and for some committed final consumers (e.g. those concerned with animal or environmental welfare); while the alignment of subjective constructions may be less easily ensured (e.g. the flavour of cheese or the attractiveness of crafts

may depend on the assumption that discerning consumers will have similar standards). However, product differentiation often entails the risks of promoting subjective constructions of quality.

Quality constructions among *institutions* surveyed under RIPPLE include objective, subjective, relative and absolute definitions, with most respondents hesitant to define quality in terms of one particular factor, tangible or intangible. However, a stress on consumer perception, presentation and promotion suggest a strong marketing approach to quality, as does a strong institutional awareness that perceptions of quality differ significantly between customers, market segments, products and stages of the marketing chain. The more formalised constructs of quality popular with consumers, such as certification and traceability, are less valued among institutions, although their importance is more noticeable in sectors which have well-established, widely recognised, independently verified, premia-generating quality assurance schemes. There is growing emphasis within institutional circles on developing and communicating concepts of quality. Often, this is part of a strategy to create market niches and differentiate products, but in some cases it is with the aim of achieving a price premium, and in others it is seen as necessary purely to maintain market share. Many multi-sectoral agencies also undertake activities (e.g. product development and training programmes) in which quality promotion is integral but not explicit.

3. REGIONAL IMAGERY

3.1. Regional images and their promotion

Regional images are representations of place involving meanings which may vary spatially between individuals and change over time. Place promotion is the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographical localities (Gold and Ward, 1994), or the selling of a selected package of facilities or of a whole place through images composed of associated attributes (Ashworth and Vogt, 1994). Although place promotion has a long history, the conscious application of marketing techniques to places as a solution to planning problems, and increasingly as a philosophy of place management, is relatively new. An even more recent focus has been on the promotion of rural places, especially in the tourism literature : of particular relevance here are trends in cultural, heritage or green tourism in which tourists seek experiences

specifically associated with rural areas. European policies (e.g. LEADER) have also fostered the promotion of rural places, not only as the basis for tourism but also as an aid to the development of the strong sense of community regarded as a necessary pre-requisite for successful endogenous development (Ray, 1996).

3.2. Commodification of regional images

Different aspects of regional image can be "commodified" for promotional purposes by a variety of actors, including local authorities, tourist boards, producer groups and private sector companies. "Commodification" suggests that certain ingredients of images (such as local cultures) can become products with exchange value. The Scottish Tourist Board, for example, describes Scotland's tourism "product" as its landscape, culture and people ; and the commercialisation of Scottish culture has meant that certain artefacts (e.g. tartan) have become emblematic of Scotland and its products. The linking of specific products to the "cultural markers" of regional image can, in principle, enhance the value of those products, and rural areas can re-value themselves through their cultural identity (Ray, 1998), thereby retaining more of the value-added accruing to products produced within them and taking more control over their economic activity.

In general, links between products and their region of production are not well developed in the UK, in contrast to some other EU countries, notably France. To an extent, this is associated with the difficulties of creating effective place images : in marketing terms, it is a problem of defining the "product" and the target market within which it will be "consumed" (Gold and Ward, 1994). Regional images operate at a variety of levels ; they can be promoted differently for different purposes to different consumers ; and assessing the effectiveness of promotional campaigns is complex, given that perceptions are moulded by many different influences and that stereotypes are resilient and long-lasting. There is also no necessary coincidence between the jurisdictional boundaries of a promotional authority and the spatial units "consumed" by visitors, residents or product buyers. Thus, for example, although it may make developmental sense to regard West Wales as a unitary region because it faces common problems of peripherality and underdevelopment, it is far from unitary in terms of landscape, culture and administration.

Like constructions of quality, regional imagery is assembled, or created, from a combination of many sources. In addition, as with quality, regional images can be understood as representations which actors use to try and establish stable networks. For instance, institutions may construct a particular regional image and make use of regional imagery to complement incentive packages such as duty-free industrial zones, food centres and national technology parks in order to attract inward investment. Producers, however, may have a narrower view of regional image shaped by their own experiences of living and running a business within the region: they are, therefore, often aware of negative aspects of regional imagery, such as economic problems, geographic peripherality or certain stereotypes, and it may be difficult for them to regard it as a useful form of product differentiation which can relate to both tangible and intangible aspects of their products and help them to establish networks with consumers. Consumers' perceptions of regional imagery may be shaped by their own experiences as tourists, residents or onlookers; and by the constructions of others, such as film and television programmes, newspaper and magazine articles, music, novels, and hearsay, as well as formal sources such as public authority promotional schemes and travel literature.

As with quality constructions, the most stable networks and alliances are created when the regional images held by producers, consumers and institutions are in broad alignment. It follows that for regional imagery to be successfully used in the marketing of QPS, producer and institutional actors should seek to align their representations with those of consumers. The RIPPLE surveys in West Wales showed a strong convergence between producer and consumer perceptions of the Welsh regional image, with both sets of actors referring to rurality and high environmental quality, and with an awareness of negative aspects to the image, such as lack of enterprise and inward-lookingness. Yet, the extent to which producers make use of positive imagery depends on the type of products and how they are marketed, and there is accordingly wide divergence in the use of regional imagery in product marketing. Some producers (notably in cheese and craft sectors) see severe drawbacks in using regional imagery, both in terms of differentiating their own products and in terms of overall maintenance of Welsh product quality. Such differing perceptions lead to fragmented networks being developed, making it difficult, for example, to envisage

an institutionally-led common approach to the marketing of Welsh products.

In fact, in seeking to identify the most powerful producers of regional images, the scope for institutional involvement often seems marginal. A popular TV programme or novel can influence public perceptions of a region more substantially and directly than an institutional promotion campaign. Knowledge about where consumers get their information also suggests that consumer perceptions of regional imagery and quality exist in spite of, or independently of, marketing strategies. There are also clear conflicts between actors as to the type of image to be promoted, most notably as between a traditional image (stressing culture and heritage) and a modern one (stressing progressiveness and dynamism). Again, this suggests that actor networks are likely to be fragmented as different groups of actors operationalise their different views.

4. REGIONAL IMAGES AND QPS

4.1. Regional images and the promotion of QPS

In policy terms, the construction of quality is increasingly related to products invested with the "cultural capital" of specified regions. EU legislation (Council Regulation 2081/92) protects food products which are produced in defined geographic areas and which possess characteristics either *essentially due to* their geographic environment (Protected Designation of Origin - PDO), or *attributable to* their geographical origin (Protected Geographical Indication - PGI). However, such protective devices rest on the assumption that location of production defines and guarantees quality (an assumption which may not always accord with consumers' perceptions); and that configurations of actors involved in niche markets for regional QPS are able to resist the encroachment of more powerful networks, such as multiple retailers' own brands of "traditional" products.

With the exception of Moran's study of the French and American wine *appellation* systems, there is a paucity of research on the use of regional images to promote QPS. Moran cites the case of the French region of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which historically did not have a reputation for premium wine and which could not be strongly distinguished environmentally from other parts of the Rhône valley. The establishment of a strong regional identity was, therefore, essential if the wines

were to sell at high prices on the international market, and this was achieved through the *appellation* laws (Moran, 1993). The *Châteauneuf-du-Pape* name is now internationally recognised – a successful example of the linking of product quality and regional image.

Discourse analysis suggests that QPS producers encode meanings into the communications surrounding their products, but also that producers can never be sure how the encoded meanings will be understood since, whether visual, written or verbal, they are dependent on context (Burgess, 1989). The success of the imaginary geographies constructed in Scottish tourism, for example, lies in their resonance with perceptions and experiences already embedded in people's "common-sense understandings" of Scottish geography (Hughes, 1992). Similarly, the perceived "authenticity" of regional food in Northern England is based on personal factors, such as knowledge and experience, as well as on product-related factors (Tregear et al., 1997).

4.2. Linking Quality to Region of Origin in West Wales

The RIPPLE surveys in West Wales encompassed four sectors : lamb and beef, organic products, speciality cheese, and crafts. In most cases, *producers* do not always link quality to region of origin. Organic producers consider quality to lie in attributes and criteria directly related to raw materials and production methods – region of origin is, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, misleading since it deflects attention from true quality promotion. Speciality cheesemakers tend to see quality in terms of their own performance as producers rather than of region of origin, and consider that regional branding and promotion would reduce product differentiation rather than increase it. Craftspeople may sometimes use regional labels and symbols to increase turnover and appeal to profitable market segments (principally tourists), but this is often done cynically in the belief that such consumers have a low conception of quality. For many craftspeople, quality is emphatically not linked in marketing terms⁴ to region of origin since such linkage can act as a cover for poor quality crafts from free-riding producers.

A straightforward link between quality and region of origin is also difficult to discern among *consumers*. Unprompted, consumers tend to associate quality with particular manufacturers or retailers and with production

method rather than with regional origin. Deeper probing, however, shows that quality is a subjective notion perceived differently by different actors with a variety of differing motives and values. Consumer perceptions of quality, for instance, are influenced by a range of factors (e.g. age, socio-economic status, education, gender, residence and lifestyle), which in turn help to shape consumers' responses to the use of regional images as an indicator of quality. Furthermore, studies of consumption geographies show that purchase decisions are also affected by the socio-economic context : products bought directly from (or which are directly traceable to) producers, for example, are potentially invested with greater degrees of "authenticity".

Institutions fall into two groups – those directly representing particular producer interests, and those with a more general developmental viewpoint. The extent to which the former link quality to region of origin largely matches that of the producers they represent : hence, lamb/beef is promoted in a way that makes an explicit quality-region link ; organic produce is largely promoted independently of region ; and crafts institutions generally make little use of overt regional imagery. The general developmental institutions, while appreciating the necessity to link quality with regional origin in consumers' minds, show little agreement over how such association can be implemented in practice. Not only do views differ over what constitutes quality, there is also divergence on the image which Welsh regional origin should convey. Should Wales be promoted as backwards-oriented, steeped in history and heritage, and noted for its traditional quality processes and products ? Or should its forward-lookingness be stressed, with its potential for high-technology and contributions to a vibrant modern British and European culture ? The problem is exacerbated since Wales has not hitherto been a high-profile region (in contrast to Scotland) either overseas or within the UK, suggesting the need to "re-brand" it.

Among the study sectors, lamb/beef is the most successful in achieving a clear link between quality and region of origin. Welsh lamb and beef promotional campaigns make specific reference to their Welsh origin ; build upon the positive associations of Wales with livestock-rearing on traditional farms, green valleys and good stockmanship ; and link such associations with quality assurance. Lamb production in particular is seen by consumers as an extensive form of agriculture which makes use of environmentally attractive hill land

and which is conducted by farmers continuing a traditional way of life. Such perceptions mean that it is relatively easy to link lamb with an attractive image of Wales in times of increasing environmental stress and quality of life concerns. In contrast, it is more difficult to envisage an effective association between product and place where products are not obviously land-based, where production methods are intensive, and where producers are more obviously business-oriented.

A persuasive alternative view of the link between quality and regional image is found in the organic and crafts sectors. Producers and institutions in both considered that product quality is the primary foundation upon which a regional image should be based. The implications of this insight – that products create the image – are that developmental effort is best expended on improving product and process quality, and that an appropriate image will naturally follow. Promoting a regional image in the hope that product quality will follow brings the danger that consumers feel cynically manipulated, and that unscrupulous free-riding is encouraged by producers of low quality products.

CONCLUSIONS

Niche markets and regional development

Key policy-forming institutions suggest that the demand for regional QPS is strong. "Consumers are tending to attach greater importance to the quality of foodstuffs" and there is "a growing demand for agricultural products or foodstuffs with an identifiable geographic origin" (EU Regulation 2081/92). People are increasingly seeking "quality, scarcity and novelty of products" (OECD, 1995 : 19), and the OECD advocates a strategy for rural development based on the development of "niche products" which target defined and un-exploited market segments in order to reduce the need for competition solely on the basis of price. Future directions for many rural areas, therefore, may include product differentiation strategies (e.g. quality marks) which help to create niche markets for QPS, and peripheral regions may have particular opportunities in terms of their imagery and popular perceptions surrounding the traditionality and authenticity of their products. It is likely that many rural areas are not achieving their full potential in terms of marketing products which offer authenticity of place of origin to consumers with a growing interest in QPS.

Niche markets can bring together regional imagery and QPS and can be conceptualised as the outcomes of the intersecting networks of particular producers, institutions and consumers. Actor-network theory suggests that all three sets of actors are engaged in a constant process of alliance-building in attempts to enrol allies into their networks through a process of representation of their own perceptions, needs or wants in relation to QPS. This conceptualisation is particularly applicable to producers and institutions, but it is also relevant to consumers since they increasingly seek to redefine rurality and authenticity. For example, the speciality cheese-making sector in West Wales is of comparatively recent origin, but consumer demand for its products has made it an integral part of the rural image of the region.

The extra-local context of regional development

The "actor-oriented approach" to rural development (FitzSimmons and Goodman, 1998) emphasises Ray's insight that local development action is only fully understandable when juxtaposed with enabling extra-local forces (Ray, 1998) and a wider structural environment (Jenkins and Parrott, 1998). Producers operate within global production/consumption relationships ; consumers' enthusiasm for regional QPS is informed by wider social movements such as environmentalism ; and institutional conflicts arise at all geographical scales from the local to the global. Local and regional actors, therefore, build networks within a context of extra-local regulation and change ; local networks are linked to extra-local ones through key agencies such as LEADER ; and local processes are affected by extra-local interventions such as tourist flows. In short, local processes are embedded in, and feed back into, global processes in a continual cycle of interaction.

The precise configuration of a particular regional QPS network and its relations with extra-local networks contribute to its effectiveness in promoting rural development. Endogenous and exogenous processes in rural development are in dynamic tension, as each set of actors represents its own conceptions and demands ; and the representations which dominate are those flowing through the most powerful networks. Nevertheless, representations are in social and regulatory, as well as economic arenas, such that power relations are not always obvious. Three examples can be cited. First,

the policy goal of promoting and protecting regional QPS often conflicts with increasingly stringent requirements in response to wider food hygiene concerns. These impose intolerable costs on some small QPS producers, suggesting that events (or the media's interpretation of them) can undermine policy intentions and introduce subtle empowering and dis-empowering effects. Second, economic logic suggests that multiple retailers will increasingly dominate supply chains and force traditional producers into compromise with consumer demands (Marsden, 1998). The RIPPLE producer survey, however, showed that significant numbers of consumers and small producers refuse to accept large retailers' conceptions of quality on ideological as well as practical grounds. Third, many QPS consumers and producers are motivated as much by lifestyle and ethics as by conventional economic concerns, suggesting that many local networks are

sufficiently robust to withstand the encroachment of multiple retail capital into traditional QPS markets based on existing artisanal circuits.

Actor-networks, then, are affected by broad processes operating at different geographical scales. Their intersection takes place within international and national regulatory contexts, which facilitate the current regime of accumulation, but with potential for niche markets to emerge to meet the demands of increasingly disanchored, segmented and knowledgeable consumers. The macro-processes of regulation and accumulation are mediated at the local level through the local mode of social regulation, which consists not only of institutional, political and economic structures, but also of culture, traditions and place history. It seems probable that such processes will become increasingly important features in the future development of peripheral rural regions.

NOTES

- (1) "Regional Imagery and Quality Products and Services in the Lagging Regions of the European Union" (RIPPLE) - FAIR 3 - CT 96-1827.
- (2) FAIR 3 - CT 96-1827. RIPPLE is a collaborative research programme funded under the EU's FAIR programme and involving the Departments of Geography at the Universities of Coventry, Lancaster, Leicester, Caen, Valencia, Galway and Trinity College Dublin ; the Scottish Agricultural College (Aberdeen), the Institute of Rural Studies (University of Wales, Aberystwyth), Cemagref (Clermont-Ferrand), Teagasc (Dublin), Department of Economics (University of Patras), and the Institute for Rural Research and Training (University of Helsinki).
- (3) However, the validity of such knowledge is increasingly questioned, as shown, for example, in the BSE and GMO affairs in the UK. This results in continual revisions of self-identity in the light of new information, knowledge and persuasion.
- (4) In production terms, however, the use of some distinctively local materials, such as slate or Welsh gold, provides an important link between local provenance and quality.

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