

BOOK REVIEW

Kjaernes, Unni, Harvey, Mark and Warde, Alan: *Trust in Food: A Comparative and Institutional Analysis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 240 pp., £45.00, ISBN-10: 1403998914/ISBN-13: 978-1403998910

This is a nutrient-rich book; perhaps it is occasionally nutrient-dense. It examines trust in regards to food, employing a framework that compares market, consumer, and state institutions across six countries. The central objective is to ‘explain variations in popular trust in food by distinct processes of institutionalisation’ (42). The authors’ central message is: ‘institutions matter’ (47). Individuals matter also, but purely individualistic explanations are insufficient because trust (and lack of trust) in food varies by country. Whatever quibbles one might have with this book (and mine are minor), lack of scope is not one of them.

The authors’ theoretical view focuses on institutional forms of trust. Trust is social; it is a ‘property of the collective organisation of social relations’ (8). With some caveats, they apply the concept of trust to taken-for-granted practices and relations that are conditional on performance. They settle on two institutional explanations of trust: familiarity (based on personal networks) and confidence (based on institutionalised procedures). A third category – active trust (used by Giddens, Beck and others) – is excluded as too individualised and too reliant on negotiation to apply to asymmetrical consumer/provider relations.

The data sources are extensive. Data from their own and government surveys measure levels of trust in Denmark, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Great Britain, and Norway. To minimise different meanings of trust across cultures, detailed questions are used rather than abstract concepts. This is a preferred strategy for cross-cultural surveys. The multiple dimensions of trust encompass safety, nutrition, quality, and ethics. (A quibble here – survey instruments would have been a useful appendix.) Institutional context was captured from documentary sources and interviews. Eight institutional agents were considered: farmers, manufacturers, retailers, consumers, government officials, food scientists, consumer organisations and media.

The authors’ methodology addressed limitations of the small sample of six cases by applying sequential analysis of correspondences between outcomes (i.e., trust) and institutional explanations. Some findings were

consistent across all countries: people have more confidence in vegetables than in meat, and they trust fresh food more than processed food. Another cross-national result found that state authorities are perceived as most trustworthy, market actors less so, and trust is lowest for politicians (except in Norway and Denmark where market actors were least trusted). Most significant were the distinct variations in trust in food by country: Italy and Portugal show low trust, Norway and Denmark higher, Great Britain and Germany are mixed cases.

Individual characteristics explained very little variation in trust so the analysis shifts to state and market institutions, which they describe as 'the stabilization of mutually recognized rules and resources for social interaction' (48). The authors' key explanatory framework is 'triangular affairs of trust': consumer trust in providers and consumer trust in the state. They examine institutions of consumption, such as the tendency to rely primarily on processed food or food cooked at home. Such patterns are then tested against market institutions, such as the relative power of food manufactures or food retailers.

Few generalisations emerge from this study; however, some patterns appear amongst the complex interactions of consumer, market and state institutions. Where trust is high, consumers trust at least one entity, but not necessarily the same one. For example, UK consumers place high trust in providers because they perceive that providers deliver safe, nutritious, and affordable food. However, in Norway, trust in food is high because of confidence in the capacity of the state to regulate food providers, not because consumers trust providers. Italians distrust both providers and politicians, and they distrust that the state can effectively regulate providers, so low trust prevails. The authors conclude that no single institutional combination guarantees trust, but trust can be accounted for by a kind of 'fit' (164), where interlocking features of consumer, state and market institutions are complementary, rather than discordant.

This book is commendable for many reasons but mainly because it challenges individualised accounts of consumers and trust. It is a welcomed rejection of the hypertrophied neoliberal individual consumer as the focal unit of analysis. Second, this project is comparative, international and macro-social at the institutional level. The arguments situate food issues within broad sociological debates (e.g., agency/structure, the nature of consumption), something too rarely done in food research. Finally, the authors do not over-simplify their complex findings. Their focus on triadic relationships counters the sometime simplistic binary opposition of state and market. The addition of the state to the consumer/provider relationship is a key contribution of this volume.

Most of their 'plausible causal accounts' (170), as they describe their conclusions, are persuasive; however, critical readers will have a few

reservations. First, the authors argue that UK customers have become powerful. For example, they argue that episodes such as the BSE crisis have provoked responses such as the creation of new regulators, independent from both providers and the state. This 'institutionalisation of distrust' is evidence of an authentic realignment of power in favour of consumers. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) in the UK is given as an example of an agency independent from producers and the state (152). Consumer organisations take issue with this claim of independence, citing the fact that staff from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (charged with promoting provider, not consumer, interests) were the first appointees to FSA, and also claiming that the slow action by the FSA on food safety issues including salt levels, food labelling and GM regulations is evidence of its continuing ties to industry.

Second, they suggest that food is becoming more politicised, arguing that food issues have been reframed from 'social problems' to 'consumer problems' (172). Reframing a problem as a consumer issue need not make it more political. For example, defining the issue of food labelling as the need to provide information to empower consumer choice is far less political than framing labelling as an issue of corporate moral responsibility to provide safe and nutritious food.

Finally, for a book about food, there is little weight given to gender here. There are institutions, not reducible to politics or economics, that warrant deeper study. It is an almost universal truth almost universally acknowledged that women do the majority of food shopping and preparation. A robust finding from this research is that women have lower trust in food than men across all countries. It is worth considering whether trust in food depends on what type of consumer one is: buyer or eater.

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