Feeding on fraud

Peter J. Atkins, Durham University

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IN MY OPINION the recent horse meat scandal should not have come as a surprise. On the one hand the history of food system evolution in this country suggests that we are prone to this kind of problem. And on the other hand we have been asleep on the job. In 2010 the Coalition government reduced the responsibilities of the Food Standards Agency rather than supporting and strengthening it, so what did they expect?

My research is on the historical geography of food quality. What I have found is that during periods of lax regulation the food system offers ample opportunity for cheating. This was particularly true in the nineteenth century when the consumer was subjected to a series of staggering frauds. Cheap bread, for instance, was whitened with alum to simulate the colour of higher quality loaves. Milk was widely adulterated, to the extent that the average pint contained one quarter added water. It was common also to use dyes such as red led and copper salts to make sweets, cheese and pickles look more attractive, even though the chemicals involved were toxic. Eventually these practices were brought under control by legislation and regimes of local authority inspection but the journey was slow because of opposition from the vested interests in the food industry and from political ideologues who argued for the freedom of the market. After all, they said, one person's fraud is another's product innovation.

The horse meat scandal has been a matter of adulteration and it is certainly not an isolated incident. There have been many other examples in recent decades, some with health consequences. For example, 600 people died in Spain and 20,000 were made ill in 1981 by consuming rapeseed oil that had been intended for industrial purposes but was sold instead on street markets as 'olive oil'. Then, in 1985, a number of Austrian wineries were found to have illegally adulterated their wines using diethylene glycol (an ingredient of anti-freeze), which is toxic. This was to make them appear sweeter for the German bulk, cheap wine market. This was an organized fraud employing advanced wine chemistry and much modern adulteration is technically advanced in this way. One of the most shocking events of all came in China in 2007 when thousands of babies were hospitalized with kidney stones and renal failure, and over 300,000 people were affected to a lesser degree. The problem was traced to

contaminated milk and baby formula produced by a dairy company in Hebei province, in the north. This was not an accident. The motivation was to increase profits by watering the milk and then adding melamine, a type of resin, to boost its apparent protein content. The draconian response of the authorities was to execute two of the factory managers and jail others implicated, although the fraud seems to have been quite widespread in a trade used to using 'protein powder', with no questions asked.

In addition to weak regulatory practices around the world with regard to food, it is the intensification and increasing complexity of modern industrial food systems that explains the opportunities to make profits from this most important of our life support systems. The disgusting pictures in our media of the so-called 'mechanically recovered meat' lend credence to jokes about what goes into cheap sausages, meat pies, and 'white pack' budget processed ready meals. But at least no-one is saying that horse protein in beef mince is dangerous to health. The same could certainly not have been said about sausages one hundred years ago when it was common for meat diseased with tuberculosis to end up in this type of product. The cattle concerned were aptly named 'mincers'.

So what conclusions can a geographer draw from the present state of our food industry? There are two. First, we must find alternatives to the industrialised, highly processed, chemically treated foods that dominate our supermarket shelves. While this corporate mode of supply undoubtedly reduces the cost of food per calorie, it puts our health at risk and is responsible for much of the obesity that is spreading around the Global North. The possible alternatives are on display in those European countries that still value high quality foods, often of local origin and processed by artisans rather than in large factories. It might be organic food or 'slow' food or from a trusted retailer but the point is that we need to know where it came from and who is responsible for it. In Britain we must get behind the revival of quality food and drink that is now under way across the country and part of this is demanding that supermarkets stock excellent raw materials and fully traceable manufactured items. Geographical work on food quality and alternative food networks can play an important part in understanding the paths ahead for our national food system.

The second conclusion is a matter of governance. I am convinced that a solid inspection regime is essential to deter both the criminal fraudsters and those who cut corners with hygiene and with food quality. One can almost hear the complaints about 'red tape' but

history shows us that the local and the central state have an important role to play in keeping our food both genuine and safe.

PETER ATKINS is a Professor of Geography at Durham University and is the author of *Liquid Materialities: a History of Milk, Science and the Law* Farnham: Ashgate ISBN: 9780754679219