



Anna Zeide, 2018, *Canned: The rise and fall of consumer confidence in the American food industry*

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Canned is about the ways the American canners shaped consumers' trust since the nineteenth century. The author, Anna Zeide, moreover exposes how by doing so the canners laid the foundation upon which is built the modern processed food business, and how "machinations beyond the view of the consumers were critical" (p. 3) in this process. To do so, Anna Zeide dissects the construction and the evolution of the networks canners created around them, at the core of which resides the National Canners Association (NCA), a trade association created in 1907 and today known as the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA).

Although not explicitly presented as such, this ambitious work is divided in two parts. The first one is focused on the forms of external legitimization sought by the canners until the First World War. The second one exposes a major shift in the industry's tactics: the reduced importance given to external agents, controls, and regulations as sources of legitimacy, and the many attempts to manipulate directly the consumers' representation of canned goods. This means that canners no longer look for consumers' trust mainly by promoting federal regulation or by financing agricultural enhancements, but by building brand identity, *astroturfing*, and marketing research. In practice, the book is constructed by a succession of cases (the botulism outbreak caused by canned olives around 1920, the BPA in Campbell's Soup cans in the 2000s ...) who serve the historical and thematic progression. This construction allows to study with economy and precision a broad subject, but it can also lead to some issues. The author focuses on cases and periods where canners invented new solutions to deal with specific problems, and assesses that those constitutive moments allow us to explore the multiplicity of tools in the hand of the agribusiness to shape consumers' trust. Yet, there is not much discussion on the destiny of such tools, their evolution, or their possible interactions. For example, the case of the canned peas'

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improvement between the two World Wars presents the relation between agricultural scientist and the food industry. But what then? Do the relations built at that time remain the same throughout the twentieth century? Do the canners simply change focus, and at one point give up agricultural sciences in favor of marketing and social sciences? That said, we can fairly assume that this weakness is unavoidable, considering the ambitious subject pinpointed by Anna Zeide.

The first three chapters present cases where canners relied mainly on external regulation and expertise to prove to the consumers that their products are indeed safe and clean, or to enhance them. The condensed milk cans (Chapter 1) are among those products originally used during wartimes and explorations, but swiftly adapted to the mainstream market. To overcome consumers' disregard for such an opaque and unknown product, canners mainly used two methods: bacteriological and toxicological sciences, and state or federal regulations. They especially believed that "a law might serve as a proxy for overcoming the opacity of the tin can" (p. 29), hence they were instrumentals in the creation of the *Pure Food and Drug Act* of 1906. The case of peas' improvement effort between the two world wars (Chapter 2) mainly shows how canners looked after the support of agricultural scientists, and how they funded universities and researchers in order to improve the crop, taste, and overall quality of peas cultivated for them. Whereas those examples expose the quest for external, if transparent, legitimization of industrial products, the one about the botulism outbreak in olive cans around 1920 marks a pivot in the modern forms of agribusiness' public actions. In essence, the coverage made by newspapers showed to the canners that a gap could exist between the public perception of a problem and what they thought the objective truth was: even if they viewed "botulism [as] a relatively insignificant issue as measured by actual number of cases, they realized it was rendered significant by consumer apprehension" (p. 91). The strategy they used at that time was a mix of public reassurance and mitigation of the scope of the problem, alongside attempts to shape public regulation and scientific discourse.

The fourth chapter continues to study the shift in the activity of the NCA, between the two World Wars. In their opposition to the Consumer's Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration, they opposed in house labeling and brand identity to mandatory grade labeling of their products. While the NCA has previously complied with scientific findings and regulatory measures, because it was that way canners talked to the consumers, around the 1930s, they started to resist this kind of external intrusion and "began to substitute the knowledge of quality that might come through grade with the illusion of quality that came through rich advertisements" (p. 134). From now on, it seems that regulations, including mandatory grade labeling, were neglected in favor of advertising and brand identity, deemed more reassuring to the consumers. The case of the mercury level in tuna cans, between the 1960s and the 1970s, is exemplary of this trend (Chapter 5). Following a research led by the State University of New York on the high levels of toxic methyl-mercury, more than 12.5 millions of tuna cans were removed from the shelves. Instead of pushing research on the matter and/or environmental measures, canners relied on social sciences and marketing: "no longer were improved technologies, agricultural practices, and bacteriological findings sufficient as primary methods of winning over consumers. Instead, postwar canners tried to hold on to an increasingly skeptical consumer base by employing motivational research, increasing their advertising budgets, and investing in political lobbying" (p. 136). This

led also to the use of *astroturfing*, foundations, and lobbying in order to control the public discourse on a specific problem. Those techniques were used to oppose the rise of environmentalism, consumers' associations, and safety concerns in today food market, like the presence of BPA in Campbell's Soup cans (Chapter 6). While the problem of BPA is a technical one, the contamination of the food by the container, canners supported research that focused "less on the technical than on the social—less on the problem itself than on managing the perception of the problem" (p. 165). Campbell has recently invested a heavy amount of money in a new form of market research, the "neuromarketing." As a substitute for the traditional questionnaires and focus groups used by market researchers, the neuromarketing uses brain-imaging to go "straight to the source" (p. 172) and to understand what happens in the brain, if not the mind, of a consumer when he sees a can of Campbell's Soup. This led to changes like the removal of the spoon from the label (deemed as a non-desirable element for the consumer to see) and the addition of some steam. Indeed, while early canners courted agricultural or bacteriological scientists to improve the materials they used to produce cans or the content itself, the last case presented by Anna Zeide shows that they seem to favor nowadays forms of expertise derived from social sciences, market research, and political lobbying. They look to improve directly the perception of their products by the consumers, while keeping at bay other forms of external legitimization.

By trying to shape the consumers' trust, early canners have contributed to what makes and animates the contemporary food market. *Canned* also shows that this "trust" is neither a given nor an immutable object, and is continually constructed and negotiated by the actors concerned. However, *Canned* also gives some insights on how a seemingly contemporary phenomenon (corporate discourses on "social responsibility," the use of foundations, the social sciences expertise, etc.) could be connected to the long-term study of the food industry.

While this is an important contribution, the book is not exempt from criticism. Focused on the "face" that canners wanted to maintain, and the relations they built around them, we know in the end only a few things about their internal struggles and organizations. We can only take for granted that the canners were indeed the pioneers of the modern food system, and that the other manufacturers only fitted themselves in the mold of the NCA. Centered on the canners, the book is nevertheless bound to mention frequently consumers themselves; the way they are depicted sometimes fails to convince. This concerns for example the sudden appearance of consumers' advocacy movements. We can certainly say that, due to the materials used (mainly the archives of trade associations) and to the fact that the canners are the main actors, depicted consumers exist mainly in the manufacturers' mind, but this is not so much expressed nor rationalized. While the author uses external sources (like famous books, letters, and boycott campaigns) to present reality-grounded consumers, an absence of systematization in the materials' treatment about consumers cripples what would have been otherwise a very welcome addition.

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