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Cheese and Late Modernity

Steven Shapin

- *Camembert: A National Myth* by Pierre Boisard, translated by Richard Miller

In 1999, when the French peasant leader José Bové trashed a McDonald's under construction near Montpellier, so becoming a national and, soon, international resistance hero, one motive for his virtuous vandalism was cheese. The Americans had unilaterally imposed trade restrictions on the excellent local Roquefort, and, if there was going to be no Roquefort in the US, there was no reason to tolerate the 'McMerde' double bacon cheeseburger in France. American multinational muck was *malbouffe*: bad to eat, bad for the peasant farmers in *la France profonde* who produced the proper stuff, bad for France. The sentiment was popular, and that's why Bové spent only six weeks in jail, and why Lionel Jospin called his action 'just': the defence of fine French food against American anti-cuisine was recognised as a moral act. Invited by Ralph Nader later that year to the demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, Bové underlined the point, smuggling some unpasteurised Roquefort past American customs officers and posing for the cameras eating a Roquefort sandwich in front of a local McDonald's, which was duly vandalised in its turn. 'You are what you eat,' Bové said, 'where you live and what you do. We are peasants and citizens, not shareholders, not servile slaves at the mercy of agribusiness.' The peasant-shepherd – the Astérixian champion of local food – has become world-famous, and you can download his dicta in defence of localism from that least local of media, the World Wide Web.

So here's a way into the tensions and paradoxes of the way we eat now: globalised food has secured its spread across the dietary

landscape by managing two tricks at once. First, as it has become globalised, so it has become homogenised: it is the same everywhere, or, more accurately, widely believed to be the same everywhere. The natural home for a McDonald's is the international airport lounge, and the *Economist* can find no better way of assessing the real value of world currencies than comparing the local price of a Big Mac against a US standard. Belief in the stable identity of the product, wherever in the world it may be consumed, is one of the conditions of its success. Stability across space and time is central to both the notion and the value of a brand, and the McDonald's brand, or the more specific brand of the Big Mac, is worth a lot. Note, however, that the homogeneity of the globalised product is necessarily a relative matter, and belief in its stability may not be supported in reality. Though it is evidently a great secret, I'm told that McDonald's buns have a lot more sugar in Britain than they do in the States; there is, of course, no beef (Hindu sensibilities) or pork (Muslim) in the Indian 'Maharaja Mac'; the mayonnaise has no egg in it (for vegans); and, when Bové did his splendid work on the Montpellier McDonald's, the local company representative was at tactical pains to stress difference, assuring the demonstrators that the burgers were an authentically local product, containing only French beef 'from the farm'. Second, globalised products such as the Big Mac and Coke have secured their spread across the world by travelling in the special channels carved out by American power, capital and culture. While Big Macs are now everywhere – you can avoid them in Bhutan and Afghanistan, but that's a high price to pay – it would be impossible to explain their global distribution without attending to those channels and to their identification with the powerful idea of America. Just as Château Lynch-Bages has a Pauillac Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée, so the Big Mac is AOC USA. You can't account for why so many people throughout the world want to eat it – or, indeed, why so many others use it as a reference for globalised abominations – without understanding their ideas about the place called America.

In these respects Camembert is a lot more like the McMerde burger than you might suppose. Pierre Boisard seeks to show how, over the past 150 years or so, the cheese has been ruined: industrialised, homogenised, delocalised and, finally, pasteurised – and all without

the assistance of American multinational corporations. It's almost wholly an indigenous French story: the Camembert producers made it into the national cheese – the most popular and best-selling of any cheese in France – and then into an internationally recognised and traded commodity. *Camembert* is a gripping read, and if it winds up using cheese as a perspicuous site for understanding the making of modernity, well, there are lots of other cheese books which really are just about cheese.

If you're going to make a coherent case that an authentic local product has been ruined through modernisation, you first have to say what it originally was. But that's not so easy in the case of Camembert, and this is where the 'myth' comes in. No one really knows when Camembert was invented. The current founding myth received an enormous boost in 1926, when an American devotee visited Normandy, having heard a story that Camembert was created in 1791 by a Norman woman named Mme Marie Harel, who got the secret from the Abbé Gobert – in other versions, the Abbé Bonvoust – a recusant priest from the area around Brie whom she was protecting from the Terror. Supposedly, the priest had taught her how to make a Brie-like cheese in a round Livarot mould. Two years later, the Camembert producers – recognising the marketing value of a good myth and a patron saint, especially one dating the origin of the national cheese to the birth of the Republic – put up a statue in Mme Harel's memory in Vimoutiers, representing her in traditional Norman dress (though no one knew what she looked like) and dedicated generically 'To the Norman Farm-Woman'. A product which was already an internationally traded and imitated commodity had been given a personified local identity. Tradition had been invented, and the origins of Camembert now had both a face and a place.

The problem, however, is that no one has anything but the sketchiest idea of what that 'original' Camembert was like, and the founding myth isn't supported by any historically reputable evidence. There are records of cheeses called Camembert made in the Pays d'Auge region of Normandy almost a century before Mme Harel's supposed discovery, while both Camembert's lineage and its association with a

specific place are less convincing than they are for other Norman cheeses such as Livarot, Pont l'Évêque and Neufchâtel. Probably, Boisard guesses, the early Camembert was a whole-milk cheese (unlike Livarot, which is made from skimmed milk), perhaps roughly similar to the current 45 per cent *matière grasse* norm; it was a whole-curd product ladled by hand into its mould; in the mould, it was self-draining, not pressed; it was matured on the farm (unlike both Livarot and Pont l'Évêque) for a period of between ten days and six weeks; it was about the same size and shape as it is now (round, weighing about 250-350g, and about 10-11 cm in diameter). But these are all conjectures, and there are many other possible grounds of difference and variation among products that would have made early 19th-century Camembert unrecognisable to the present-day consumer. Detailed early recipes for Camembert don't exist, and, even if they did, they would be insufficient either to allow you to make the cheese yourself or to establish what all versions of it looked and tasted like.

The producers were an ambitious lot. Myth-making about its origins was a relatively late strategy in turning Camembert into an internationally known brand. Before the middle of the 19th century, it was on sale only in a few local markets and was known to very small numbers of gourmands outside of Normandy, but within a few years the Camembert-makers were aggressively attacking the Parisian market, supplying merchants at Les Halles with creamy farm-matured cheeses. Camembert travelled to Paris by the newly built railroads that bound the nation together, efficiently connecting the metropolitan markets to regional sources of produce. Now cheese from Normandy could be in Paris in six hours instead of the three days it had taken by jolting stagecoach. The canny Norman farmers seized the opportunity to use their cattle to supply Paris with Camembert, rather than with beef or with other sorts of cheese, because careful calculations suggested the profitability of that course of action. 'The best use to which forage can be put,' wrote a chemically-trained member of the Association Normande in 1851, 'is the feeding of dairy cows . . . Camembert cheese is the form in which milk becomes the most remunerative. A double litre of milk yields 0.50 francs when converted into Camembert cheese.' It was cold

rationality that drove the spread of Camembert beyond the bounds of its local origin.

Camembert had wide appeal: by 1894 annual sales at Les Halles had rocketed to 2330 tons and its popularity had far outstripped that of its Norman rivals. The bland unctuousness of Camembert, turning naughtily pungent with age, and its aroma, in which sophisticates think they can detect vague similarities to wild mushroom soup, appealed to palates throughout France; by the end of the century it was being shipped around the world. It was in these connections that problems arose in stabilising and standardising the product. Most obviously, shippers had to find an effective way of protecting the cheeses from physical damage during transport. Originally, Camemberts travelled almost naked, set in a bed of straw, and many arrived in Paris bruised and deformed. The problem of stable travel was solved around 1890 by the invention of a mundane but crucially important artefact: the light round wooden box, originally devised for the American market, but equally useful for ensuring the cheeses' undeformed travel to Paris. These boxes were soon being made on a vast industrial scale, and, accidentally to their original purpose or not, they provided a template on which the famously kitsch Camembert labels could be affixed. Practical problems of branding, advertising and physically stabilising the product were solved all at once by the same humble technology.

But stabilising Camembert confronted another technical obstacle that was not so easily resolved and required the considerable resources of Pasteurian science. Mid-to-late 19th-century Camemberts looked nothing like the slightly dusty, chalk-white product to which we are accustomed. Their rinds varied enormously: most commonly, they were bluish-grey with brownish-red spots, and, while white Camemberts became typical in the 1920s and 1930s, some were still coming onto the market covered with brownish spots. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that pure white became standard. It was probably frustration with the eruptions of uncontrollable nature, the fundamental indiscipline of artisanal cheese production, that propelled Camembert-makers towards the white-rind standard, but, for all we know, cheese buyers preferred it that way, too, wanting

their Camemberts to look pure and to look that way consistently, just as they wanted assurance that the cheese they bought from their retailer tasted the same time after time. Restaurateurs know to their cost how insistent customers can be that the dishes they have grown to like be prepared the same way every time, and there is no reason to suppose that cheese eaters are very different.

The standardised whiteness of Camembert was secured by scientific control of the fungal environment in which the cheese was matured. Pasteur's own interest in fermentation extended to beer, wine and vinegar, but it was his disciples who took up the systematic study of dairy products, and, by the late 19th century, strong links developed between the Pasteur Institute in Paris and the Norman cheese industry. The interest that scientists and dairy producers had in common was control. The moulds that grew on the surface of soft-centred cheeses came from the particular environment in which they were made and matured, and, in Normandy, specific indigenous *Penicillium* moulds tended to produce the traditional blue-green rind. To the scientists, the undisciplined biological environment represented a challenge: 'They wished,' Boisard writes, 'to set up rational procedures that would normalise the manufacturing process,' and the cheese-makers wished to have their help in doing so: they wanted to get the blue out. Encouraged by the industry, the scientists eventually succeeded in identifying the strains of mould that made for different coloured rinds. By inoculating cheeses with the appropriate industrially-manufactured strain, and by making the cheese factories as sterile as possible, they were able reliably to manufacture the favoured all-white cheese. In 1906, a cheese-maker wrote a letter praising a laboratory scientist's contribution: 'The moulds you sent worked very well, the cheeses are snow-white, you couldn't ask for finer.' However, scientific control not only altered the superficial look of Camembert but probably permanently changed its taste as well: 'It became less sharp, losing its peasant bite and thereby enlarging its circle of admirers.' So far as securing the widest possible customer base was concerned, blander was better.

Other stabilising and standardising measures followed, each designed to secure greater control over the manufacturing process, more

efficient and cheaper large-scale production, and enhanced reliability of the product. And each resulted in a cheese which almost certainly tasted less like it once did and whose taste was affected less by *terroir*, by spontaneously varying, unique and irreducibly local circumstances. First, instead of milk being supplied by farmers with whom the cheese-maker had a long-standing relationship of familiarity and trust, the increasing scale of production and its concentration among smaller numbers of huge producers meant that by the early 20th century, milk was being collected over a wider area, and the characteristics of a cheese that might link it to a particular locale, or even a particular farm and herd of cows, were being erased by what industrial cheese-makers celebrated as a 'highly homogeneous basic material' – 'broad mix' milk. In this process, the relationship between dairy farmer and cheese-maker increasingly became purely contractual. 'Trust was no longer enough' to guarantee quality, Boisard notes, and constant testing at the factory became essential. The modern Camembert, here as in other respects, was a product of a new form of social relations between suppliers, workers, factory owners, distributors, merchants and consumers. The cheese we have lost was a product of a lost world of social relations.

Second, the moulding of traditional Camemberts had required exquisite skill and care. The women doing the moulding had to judge the exact moment at which the curd was sufficiently clotted; then they had to use a special spoon to place the curd in its mould without breaking it up, tracing a spiral path from circumference to centre, and repeating that disciplined gesture four or five times until the mould was filled. When the cheese had been turned, skilled female labour then salted it evenly, using gestures again hard to learn and vital to the quality of the final product. By the 1980s, however, ladle-moulding was automated in almost all of the industrial plants. Robots with 20 arms now mimic traditional human actions, assuring hygiene and dependability, and, of course, reducing cost: the skilled women have largely disappeared from present-day Norman factories, the five largest of which turn out about 1.5 million Camemberts a day, employing a workforce of fewer than 500. 'No cheese here has been touched by human hands,' the manager of one of these factories boasts. But critics point out that the moulding machines have blades

that cut through the curd instead of leaving it whole, crucially affecting both texture and taste.

The final indignity suffered in the modernisation of Camembert was pasteurisation. Raw milk is a complex and unpredictable substance, and pasteurisation appealed to scientists and manufacturers as an effective way of gaining better control over its behaviour. Once you kill all of its naturally occurring microscopic living forms, you can reinject the milk with the industrially supplied lactic bacilli of your choice, making it, as Boisard says, ‘obedient to discipline’: you are ‘eradicating chance and standardising the production process’. Norman producers resisted pasteurisation when it was first advocated for Camemberts in 1908, but by the 1950s the practice had become widespread. However, when you pasteurise the milk for Camembert you affect more than the stability of the final product. The curd doesn’t drain as well and has to be handled differently, so changing its characteristics at a fundamental level. While cut-curd cheese might be a very different thing from the traditional product, it allowed for further mechanisation; it increased productivity and reduced waste, enabling Norman cheese-makers to compete against lower-cost products. Ninety per cent of all Camembert is now produced industrially, and pasteurisation is central to making the affordable, standardised cheeses that dominate supermarket shelves. Through the industrialising process local art was being transformed into global science; production was being concentrated and its scale vastly increased; the world market was being supplied at competitive prices; money was being made.

The force propelling Norman Camembert-makers fully into the industrialised world was market competition, which they had largely brought on themselves by their own success. They made a cheese that was generally appealing; they marketed it effectively in the metropolis; and the result was imitation. Camembert-making first escaped from the region of the Auge to Normandy in general. Then, as early as the 1870s, ‘Camembert’ was being produced in Brittany, in the Loire, in the Allier and, eventually, in many other places throughout France. (You can now get Camemberts – sometimes even raw-milk Camemberts – made in Canada, Germany, Argentina,

Japan and in several states of the US, from Vermont to Oregon.) Nineteenth and early 20th-century non-Norman French cheeses were made in varying styles, sometimes using skimmed rather than whole milk, with a fat content of 20 per cent or even lower, and could be sold on the Parisian market much more cheaply than the Norman product, just at the time when fierce competition among Norman makers for a limited supply of local milk was driving up the costs of their raw material.

Market share became a central concern, both in the market for what counted as Camembert and for cheese in general. One strategy was to make Camembert even more widely known. The Great War offered Norman cheese-makers the same sort of opportunity more notoriously exploited in World War Two by Coca-Cola: Camembert went to war. In the early part of the war, the major cheese supplied to the front-line troops was Gruyère or Cantal, but, despite Camembert's softer texture and more limited keeping qualities, the Norman producers lobbied hard to get their cheese into the trenches at below Les Halles prices. Towards the very end of the war, Camembert-makers were sending a million cheeses a month to the Front. The producers wanted to insert a leaflet into each box, stipulating the contents as 'authentic Norman Camembert', and, while the Army balked at 'non-official propaganda', the effect on the palates and memories of the soldiers was almost everything the makers desired, and this was the decisive event fixing Camembert – if not specifically Norman Camembert – in the national memory.

Another strategy was to try to establish the specificity and superiority of the Norman product. The Syndicat des Fabricants du Véritable Camembert de Normandie (SFVCN) was founded in 1909 mainly to deal with the problems generated by the success of the brand, a success whose consequences were an increasingly serious loss of local control over the name and characteristics of the cheese bearing the name. In the early 19th century, 'Camembert' did not require the protection of an *appellation contrôlée* because the Norman producers had no external competition. But by the time the SFVCN began its agitation for AOC status it was too late: it had become, Boisard writes, 'an ordinary marketable commodity subject to the

rules of competition'. The Syndicat's petition to have the designation Camembert reserved for its Norman makers was turned down by the Government, on the grounds that Normandy's Camembert was 'no better than the kind produced elsewhere'. (José Bové's beloved Roquefort easily succeeded in obtaining early AOC protection where Camembert failed, which is perhaps just a paradoxical way of noting Camembert's global success.) Moreover, securing AOC status for Camembert was made more difficult by its lack of a stable physical identity, even within Normandy. Beyond some very basic principles, methods of fabrication varied significantly from maker to maker; recipes belonged to a closely guarded oral tradition and had never been shared and agreed on. Restricting the designation Camembert to a unique place and unique mode of production would be almost like doing the same now for Cheddar.

Pressing their case through the legal system, the SFVCN had some success bringing suits against producers selling Camembert with a fat content below 36 per cent, and what Boisard calls 'lipid inflation' emerges from this context. Fat was good, and, more to the point, agreeing a high minimum fat content was a way of establishing a Norman brand identity against skimmed-milk Camembert-makers elsewhere in France. Consequently, Norman fat content went up, and advertising high fat became an important function performed by the label. Consumers were being taught to look for the Syndicat seal as a sign of top quality, and, to this end, an expensive advertising campaign was launched, using up-to-date market research techniques. The working classes, it was found, tended to eat Camembert in the summer, when it was cheaper, so ads were placed seasonally in the Communist paper *L'Humanité* – a striking confluence of capitalist marketing strategies, the economics of quasi-peasant economies, connoisseurship and social scientific knowledge.

It wasn't until 1983 that Camembert finally secured its AOC, or, rather, three varieties of the AOC. One was for any cheese that wanted simply to use the designation Camembert, allowing the raw material to come from anywhere in France and even permitting milk from other animals: you can buy Camemberts made from goat's milk.

Another AOC was for 'Camembert de Normandie', setting rules of production but not specifying the precise origin or quality of the milk used. A third designation marked out that tiny proportion of modern Camemberts made from unpasteurised milk and hand-ladled ('au lait cru, moulé à la louche'), but even here the designation is not a reliable guide to the traditional product, since some artisanal makers do not use these phrases on their labels, while Boisard suspects that some producers who do are far from traditional in their methods.

Looking at modernity from the point of view of Camembert gives some intriguing results. It's a perspective that does allow for the now commonplace lament about a lost rural economy, marked by the power of place and the rule of trust and familiar social relationships. Good Camembert comes from a good society, and even though Boisard acknowledges the appalling conditions which late 19th-century workers suffered in the new cheese factories, and the cruel discipline imposed by natural rhythms on the dairy farmer and artisanal cheese-maker, he still wants to make the case that the neutral taste of modern factory Camembert arises from the hollowing out of social relations implicated in its production. The modern industrial product is, frankly, crap, and Boisard will only touch the stuff because he values his reputation as a scholar and a gentleman: 'As one who loves distinctive and individual cheeses, I rarely eat supermarket Camembert. Indeed, I have done so for only two reasons: first, when served some as a guest, I have eaten it out of politeness; second, when working on this book, I have done so for experimental purposes.'

The worldwide popularity of 'supermarket' Camembert is sufficiently accounted for by the gullibility of the ordinary consumer and by the dumbing down of gustatory culture. Boisard can be a bit snooty about the question of price, and he doesn't have anything to say in favour of the industrial processes that deliver their products at a cost that many can afford on a regular basis. But the artisanal Camembert that he prefers costs two to three times as much as the industrial product, so, at about 15 euros per kilogram, it has to count as 'a luxury product'. It is, he assures us, 'a luxury that is still within the reach of the majority of cheese lovers. This price level is comparable to the

prices of the new kinds of cheese that are finding favour with lower-income buyers.’ Apparently contradicting his earlier complaints about the causal role of industrial advertising, and the *hoi polloi*’s preference for the bland, he now says that the only reason the masses don’t buy *cru* Camembert in quantity is not that they prefer the industrial product, or its cheapness, but that the artisanal product ‘is not often found in the places where they purchase food’.

At the same time, a description of the late modern condition must confront circumstances that point in a completely different direction. The world market for Camembert, as for many foodstuffs, has not simply become universalised, standardised and homogenised. Stories about globalisation and the relentless march of uniform fast food are not false, but neither are they exhaustively true. Late modernity must also be described in terms of a radical and accelerating fragmentation of the market and of tastes. In Paris, Boisard can lay his hands on the artisanal raw-milk Camembert he favours; I picked up a fine one this summer from the Cambridge Cheese Company in All Saints’ Passage; and, despite his claim that they are banned in the US, I have got quite decent ones in the store across the street from where I live in San Diego. The US Food and Drug Administration, egged on by the food vigilantes of the Centre for Science in the Public Interest, tried to ban all raw-milk cheeses, but had to settle for a 60-day ageing period instead – admittedly, not great for the condition of soft cheeses but no hardship for the consumer of firmer ones. In the contest over the alleged dangers of unpasteurised cheeses, the Americans were ultimately faced down by the forces arrayed behind the alarmingly named *Codex Alimentarius* of the Food and Agricultural Organisation and the World Health Organisation. It is the standardising bureaucracies of world government that we have to thank for the fact that raw-milk cheeses are easily obtained by those who want them.

So, using the career of Camembert as a metonym for modernity does work, but not quite as straightforwardly as Boisard’s otherwise superb book implies. Fifty years ago, or even twenty-five, it was very hard, if not impossible, to get *cru* Camembert – or gold seal balsamic vinegar, or single-estate Tuscan extra virgin olive oil, or jambon de

Bayonne, or Ortiz salt-packed Spanish anchovies, or Niçoise olives – if you didn't live in a world metropolis or in the regions near where they were produced. Now they are all widely available. Thanks to the Internet, Fedex, the food-writers (and their globalised publishing firms), the once-local has become global. Nor is it just the distant local that has a place in the markets; preferences for the local local are now better catered for than at any time in the recent past: farmers' markets flourish as never before in both Britain and America; the role of the 'forager' – searching out the quality produce of local farmers for top restaurants – has become institutionalised; the formerly resistant Californian wine industry is rediscovering the power of place as against the manipulations of the scientific winemaker; the cheese plates at better American eateries feature increasingly convincing Sonoma County goat cheeses and one of the finest semi-soft goat cheeses in the world, the Cypress Grove Humboldt Fog; the Slow Food movement gathers strength throughout the world and reinforces the revival of the local and the seasonal. If one characteristic expression of late modernity is the globalised standard, another is the value increasingly placed on the uniquely local. The reign of *terroir* is now.

From the *LRB* letters page: [18 December 2003] [Carol Reid](#), [Marius Pope](#).

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