The relationship between food and politics is an important theme in Latin American historiography. Many authors have addressed how food and consumption shaped notions of citizenship, gender, or cultural identity. There is also a growing body of literature on the history of nutritional expertise in Latin America. Joshua Frens-String's book *Hungry for Revolution* combines these two areas with a case study on food's significance for twentieth-century Chilean history.

Chile was among the Latin American countries where food security and scientific expertise in nutrition had already gained political importance by the 1930s. The author traces the development of food policy from the early twentieth century to 1973, when the military staged a coup against the socialist president Salvador Allende. In his analysis, Frens-String focuses on poor and working-class Chileans, but he also considers middle-class actors, especially their opposition to the Allende government's food policy in the 1970s. This political history is enriched by sketches of professional biographies, such as minister of health Eduardo Cruz-Coke (1937–38) and agrarian reformer Manuel Elgueta.

Frens-String argues that the food policy under Salvador Allende was based on popular struggles as well as previous administrations' policies. Since 1905, food had been a major factor for mass politicization and social mobilization. Through new institutions for food distribution and consumer protection, food policy contributed to the building of a welfare state in Chile. However, Frens-String identifies three weaknesses in these efforts: First, state policy favored urban consumers and failed to overcome long-term inequalities in Chilean society. Second, agricultural and medical experts launched visions for good nutrition based on calculations of calories and protein. Accordingly, they advocated for technical solutions for fighting hunger and malnutrition. Third, left-wing politicians assigned women a higher responsibility for changing dietary habits than men, sticking to traditional gendered divisions of labor that treated cooking and shopping as female duties.

In the first chapters of the book, the author traces the nutritional situation across the nation, the rise of social movements, and the establishment of a national food policy. He shows how political struggles over food evolved in the early twentieth century when public attention focused on the situation in the capital and the northern mining regions. As in other Latin American countries, Chilean consumers were highly concerned
about rising sugar and beef prices. In 1905, discontent led to a local revolt in Santiago de Chile, for Frens-String a “turning point” (p. 30) making the capital’s inhabitants aware of the need to organize for affordable food. Political mobilization intensified again in the late 1920s when economic crisis affected the Chilean economy. To protect people against high food prices, the Chilean government established the first agency for consumer protection in 1932. At that time, scientists began intervening in these political debates, delivering data to government institutions and demanding political action.

In the 1930s, Chilean and international scientists conducted surveys on the nutritional situation. Some Chilean scientists helped to shape national food policy in the late 1930s and 1940s. The most prominent example is future president Salvador Allende himself, who published a survey on child mortality in 1939 that Frens-String characterizes as a “public health manifesto for social reformers” (p. 75). Scientists’ calls for a national food policy that favored low-income consumers quickly produced results. In 1937, the Arturo Alessandri administration established a National Nutrition Council that recommended limiting exports of nutritious foods and supporting its local producers through favorable credit schemes. The council closely cooperated with other state institutions in establishing price controls for food staples and creating businesses to promote healthy nutrition, such as popular restaurants and consumer stores.

However, the economic consequences of World War II complicated workers’ access to food. At that time, the National Food Council moved to a more conciliatory position and turned its attention from food distribution to nutrition education. From the mid-1930s on, scientists increasingly held “poor” food habits responsible for the deficiencies in caloric and nutrient intake. In their opinion, food enrichment and educational measures were necessary to ensure adequate intake of vitamins and minerals.

From chapter 4 on, the author turns his attention to food production and agrarian reform. In the 1950s and 1960s, decades marked by the global rise of the Green Revolution, the Chilean government favored technology-based solutions for increasing food supply and cooperated with the UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the World Bank. Consequently, the Chilean state supported the rising industrial production of canned food and powdered milk. Despite official visions of rural-urban harmony, the redistribution of land as well as job insecurity due to mechanization caused considerable conflict. In the context of ongoing urbanization, the government encouraged food production close to the large cities and put food distribution partially under state control.

In the end, the results of food policy from the 1930s to the 1960s were mixed. Despite improvements in food access for urban consumers, Frens-String concludes that food production failed to sufficiently increase, and roughly one-third of Chilean adults suffered from malnutrition by the early 1970s (p. 126). Thus, ensuring access to food was a major challenge for the Popular Unity coalition led by Salvador Allende that won the 1970 election.

The Allende government initially promised that the revolution would have the “taste of empanadas and red wine” (p. 131). Frens-String demonstrates convincingly that the first year presented a “bonanza” (p. 122) for popular consumers, who had unprecedented access to milk, coffee, and household goods. The book’s last chapter follows the course from bonanza to crisis and explains how small merchants and middle-class and elite women as well as landowners became radicalized in campaigns against the government’s food policy. In July 1971, the Ministry of Economy created Juntas de Abastecimiento y Precios (JAP). Their tasks included the organization of food distribution, price control, and consumer
education, but the committees quickly became a “deeply contested space” (p. 142).

The political polarization over the Allende administration became fully visible in October 1972: a nationwide transportation strike turned into a broad opposition movement that paralyzed the country. Afterward, grassroots activism related to food supply increased dramatically. In Santiago, neighborhood initiatives, JAPs, and workers’ organizations (cordones industriales, or industrial belts) established popular stores and distributed baskets with staple foods throughout the districts. Hence, food activism also provided political opportunities for those who wanted a more radical transformation of Chilean society. In the epilogue, Frens-String shows how the Pinochet dictatorship rapidly reversed economic policy and reframed the consumer as an individual freed from state control.

In sum, Hungry for Revolution invites us to think about the relationship between food, politics, and science. However, questions remain on the global context of Chilean food policy and gender roles. Although Chilean food policy was immersed in international politics and the global food economy throughout the twentieth century, the book falls short in making these connections. The idea of revolution figures prominently in the title, but the book does not address other revolutionary trajectories in food policy. Did left-wing Chilean politicians evaluate other revolutionary policies in countries such as the Soviet Union, Mexico, or Cuba? Was there a dialogue among Latin American scientists and politicians? In addition, the influence of international politics and world food markets remains in the background. Did Chilean food policy integrate the concept of food security and other guidelines from international organizations? Did the world food crisis undermine the Allende administration’s political efforts?

In many surveys for international organizations, female nutritionists did the fieldwork and data collection. The author portrays women as a “driving force” (p. 48) in social movements and the implementation of Chilean food policy. Nevertheless, male actors clearly dominate in the biographical sketches while female nutritionists are not mentioned. In Chile, their professional education started in 1939.[1] As the book lacks historical background on gender roles in Chile and women’s participation in Chilean politics, it might be difficult for readers to understand why gender stereotypes persisted and male expertise dominated in food policy. Some chapters, for example 2 and 4, include short sections on gender, but the analysis does not run through the general narrative on food policy.

Despite these weaknesses, Hungry for Revolution makes an important contribution to the literature on food policy in Latin America. It demonstrates that food was an important factor in political mobilization from the early twentieth century on. The author persuasively explains how different actors became politicized in the struggle over food. Frens-String also carefully analyzes the impact of agricultural and nutritional expertise on Chilean politics, uncovering trajectories of academic education and professional networks. Hence, the book is a valuable resource for scholars interested in food studies, consumption history, and recent Chilean history.

Note

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