
*Hungry for Revolution* begins with the arrival of a fleet of Soviet fishing trawlers in the seas off Chile in January 1972. For Joshua Frens-String, their arrival is a culmination of half a century of food politics. When the boats arrived, the socialist Salvador Allende was President of Chile at the head of the Popular Unity revolution. The first years of the Allende government, the book argues, were, contrary to many later characterisations, a period of plenty, with well-stocked shelves in food shops, and excellent harvests. The Soviet ships were tasked with fishing for hake to increase protein consumption and shore up domestic food sovereignty. The politics of food had been a central tenet not only of Allende’s surge to power, but of a progressive history of food politics which Frens-String outlines in diachronic and multi-scalar detail. Chapter One is set in the nitrate fields and urban movements of the early 20th century. Chapter Two analyses grassroots mobilisation of food consumers in the inter-war period, and how community level food organising linked to the emergence of mass politics. Chapters Three and Four examine different moments in the state’s response to these mobilisations, before and after the Second World War, and up to the 1960s. Chapter Five takes the story into the Popular Unity period, and the revolutionary politics of “empanadas and red wine”, while Chapter Six dwells on the first years of Allende’s government, and Seven on its downfall.

The book’s central argument is that food was at the centre of the story of modern politics in Chile. It shows how half a century of radical collective politics of consumption were countered in the early 1970s by an equally radically individualist, consumerist politics of neoliberalism. As the book notes, “[w]hereas a right to subsistence had previously been a defining feature of economic citizenship and a source of collective action, the neoliberal Chilean state turned consumption into a narrow, individual economic act” (p.200). One of the effects of this change was to delink food security from food sovereignty. This emerged as
part of the now familiar shift of a group of Chilean economists towards the market fundamentalism which was to become neoliberal economic orthodoxy. Under neoliberalism and the dictatorship, “[t]o eat well”, Frens-String continues, “was not a basic economic right that the state ensured by intervening at the point of production, distribution, or exchange. Instead, it was an activity that was dictated by an individual’s time and ability to navigate the market” (ibid.). The long history of radical consumer politics in Chile has of course taken a new turn with the recent election of Gabriel Boric, and his coalition’s declared intention to turn the country away from neoliberalism.

The internationalist moment of 1972 was a highpoint followed by a fall. Domestic production began to plateau and then decline, and prices to rise inexorably. Food was an integral part of how Chilean politics closed around Allende, fracturing his fragile coalition, and fomenting the counter-revolution. Frens-String’s analysis reveals the painful historical irony that while a grassroots, consumption-based politics helped create the conditions of possibility for a revolutionary, democratic socialist government in Chile, actors in the food system then used their agency to exacerbate economic crisis and enable the military coup of September 1973. After the Soviet fishing pact, Allende’s food politics came under ever deeper attack from within and without. As part of a wider US-led squeeze on Chilean credit – “the US president’s directive in 1970 that US intelligence services should make the Chilean economy ‘scream’” (p.182) – the US Agency for International Development reduced Chile’s access to international funds. Inside Chile, the October 1972 “bosses’ strike” mobilised truckers, and “brought overland distribution of essential goods in the country to a near standstill” (p.183). The anti-Allende alliance strengthened, blaming rising prices on the democratic food institutions that the Popular Unity government put their stakes on as, “[i]n the aftermath of the October strike, the opposition ramped up its attacks on those revolutionary institutions that were most closely associated with the production, distribution, and sale of food” (p.184). These bodies, particularly the JAPS (juntas de abastecimiento y precios; supply and price control boards), are the subject of much of the book’s analysis. They did not come into being with Popular Unity, but had deep roots in the inter-war period,
and earlier socialist organising in the country, particularly, Frens-String shows, in the mining settlements of the north, and the peripheries of Santiago. They became key targets of the anti-Allende movement. The politics of food that Frens-String reveals is one in which food has both an indivisible material centrality to equality and justice, and is acutely vulnerable to use as a tool for political ends by global, economic or landed elites, by neoliberals, and by authoritarians.

The book powerfully develops and sustains a perspective that cuts across the grassroots and the elite. We see the politics of food emerging both from the ground up and through political and economic theory making. Frens-String finds space for both the community organiser and the public intellectual. The effect of this success is that across the account, a recursive story emerges that gives a rich sense of how these two fields were deeply interconnected and mutually sustained.

Hungry for Revolution reads as somewhat insistently national. Frens-String largely circumscribes his account as a specifically Chilean story. A wider history would enable a broader sense of how the politics of consumption that the book explores so effectively in Chile can be situated in wider 20th century political economy. Given Chile’s oft-cited role as an experimental site in the emergence of neoliberalism, and as global attention turns again to Chile for the possibility of a post-neoliberal politics, it is a shame that the book does not explore how, or whether, the leftist politics of food and consumption at work in Chile overlapped, connected, or disrupted other related processes elsewhere.

To do so would not be to make disconnected comparisons, but to explore grounded, contemporary, continental links. That is to say that much of Frens-String’s account could fruitfully be placed in international context. For instance, the post-First World War hunger marches and nutritional politics analysed in Chapter Two, organised by the AOAN (Asamblea Obrera de Alimentación Nacional; Workers’ Assembly for National Nutrition), and later by the Chilean Popular Front, have close parallels with hunger marches elsewhere, for instance those in the United Kingdom in the 1920s, organised by the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement (NUWM). When Frens-String writes that “labor activists,
women, and the organized left helped to build and activate new state institutions … to protect Chilean workers in their role as consumers” (p.63), it raises the question of how and whether the Chilean situation was particular, or representative. Of course, one book cannot tell a global story, and Hungry for Revolution is full of rich detail which other scholars – comparative historians, geographers, international historians – will be able to pick up and take forward. However, at times the boundary between Chile and the world seems too tightly controlled. The concluding section at the end of Chapter Three is titled “For a World Free From Want?”, and begins to position Salvador Allende’s vision of public health and food justice in a global context. Frens-String quotes Allende that this crusade in Chile could have “Hemisphere-wide usefulness” (p.86), and the new president was clearly seeking to place the Chilean project in the context of the possibilities of the Atlantic Charter. Yet this international context is then largely placed to one side.

Effectively, and engagingly, the book revolves around individual life trajectories: the AOAN organiser Carlos Alberto Martínez; Juan Chacón, the socialist activist who cut his teeth in the nitrate plains; the anti-Allende, anti-communist organiser Carmen Sáenz; and others. In these stories, the inter- and trans-national dimensions of Chilean food politics could have been further drawn out. Many of the individuals through whom Frens-String weaves together his story had global itineraries which could bring new contexts into the Chilean frame. Frens-String notes that Jorge Ahumada, for instance, whose work is analysed in Chapter Four, worked at the US Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and trained at Harvard. This training and experience, though, is left as a backdrop, rather than then brought into the analysis of Ahumada’s projects for agrarian reform. Hernán Santa Cruz, similarly, is placed in his context as an important figure in the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, and the UN body CEPAL (la Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe; the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), which was based in Santiago, but there is little sustained analysis of the significance of these deep Chilean interconnections with controversial global debates on nutrition, agrarian reform, consumer politics, and the role of food in the global order. Indeed,
the fact that CEPAL was based in Santiago receives little attention. This seems to be a missed opportunity, as it could open up the interconnections between the politics of food and the emergence of dependency theory. The story that Frens-String tells would be an ideal backdrop for an expansive turn towards an analysis of the role of the politics of food in the making of the modern world, to repurpose the book’s own title. That is not Frens-String’s project, but the impressive, detailed, and sophisticated analysis that the book offers of Chile could have both benefited from a more global perspective, and offered some elements of a new analysis of the international politics of food, grounded in Chile’s own fascinating history. That said, the book is an exemplary account of that national history, and deserves to be read widely not only by historians of 20th century Latin America, but by those exploring the geography, politics, sociology, and history of food across time and space.

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