Introduction
BUILDING A REVOLUTIONARY APPETITE

Around noon on January 26, 1972, Dr. Salvador Allende arrived at Pier D in the bustling Chilean port of San Antonio. As the Popular Unity (UP) revolution (1970–73) entered its second year, Chile’s socialist president had come to the coastal city to officially welcome a fleet of Soviet fishing ships into Chilean waters. The ships owed their presence off the Pacific coast to an accord Allende’s government had signed with the Soviet Union just a few months earlier. The goal of that pact was to increase the supply of merluza, or hake, available to Chilean consumers.

At a time when popular cuts of red meat had largely disappeared from butcher counters around the country, UP officials hoped that the domestically caught fish would satisfy consumers’ growing appetite for inexpensive protein. In Chile, the revolution would be “flavored with empanadas and red wine,” UP leaders were fond of saying, and while merluza was neither of these two traditional gastronomic goods, the goal of producing a plentiful supply of the cold-water fish reflected Allende’s promise that material sacrifice would be minimized on the country’s revolutionary march. As government officials were well aware, forging a peaceful, democratic road to socialism in many ways depended on the state’s ability to successfully link nutritional abundance with the construction of a more just and sovereign national economy.

The Soviet-Chilean fishing agreement ultimately fell short of UP supporters’ expectations. Domestic fish production surged in 1972, but alone, the initiative could not make up for shortfalls in other subsectors of the food economy, many of which grew more acute during the last eighteen months of the revolution. As the cost of food imports rose steadily and as agricultural production in the Chilean countryside struggled to rebound amid the feverish pace of land seizures, food security became a topic of impassioned
debate—and eventually of sustained protest. In this context, state-backed efforts to promote domestic alternatives to more customary, but frequently imported, foodstuffs did little to keep the government’s opponents at bay. Fish was supposed to sate consumers’ appetites, but the displeasing texture of a piece of once-frozen merluza instead became a symbol of state overreach and everyday economic uncertainty. In short, the Soviet-Chilean accord only inflamed the desire of Allende’s opponents to remove the UP from office by any means necessary.3

Yet a deeper analysis of Allende’s visit to the port of San Antonio reveals a long-standing, far more complicated portrait of the relationship between nutrition, food security, and revolutionary politics in twentieth-century Chile. Rather than being an isolated episode, the UP’s attempt to boost fish production and alter traditional consumption habits shines a light on the recurring spates of urban mobilization that food matters generated, the growing prominence of food science in Chile’s midcentury state-building process, and the emergence of ever-more-defined economic proposals about how best to ensure that food was produced, distributed, and eventually consumed in an equitable fashion. When observed through the lens of food, the Allende years appear as the culmination of, rather than a break with, decades of struggle to reimagine Chile’s social and economic future by transforming the bonds that tied together production, distribution, exchange, and consumption.

Since at least the 1930s, a period when many UP leaders, including Salvador Allende, first cut their teeth in national politics, urban workers, feminist activists, and Chile’s organized political left had vocally asserted that it was the modern state’s duty to guarantee popular access to affordable and healthy foods by exercising a more active role in national economic affairs. To better understand the social, cultural, and economic milieu out of which such demands emerged, officials embraced new methods of survey research and the latest findings and theories of international public health experts. Using the ideas of midcentury nutrition science as one important guide, prominent figures in the medical field argued that popular discontent about food prices was a sign of both economic anxiety and physical despair. Scientists’ and doctors’ efforts in the late 1930s and early 1940s to make protein, calcium, vitamins, and other essential nutrients accessible to all, irrespective of income, represented, in the words of a young Dr. Salvador Allende, a “noble experiment aimed at conserving and strengthening the prodigious raw material that is mankind.”4 Allende’s position posited a deep association between physical health and diet and between working-class wellness and national economic
productivity, and it manifested itself clearly in the work of a generation of researchers who toiled fastidiously to improve the poor nutritional practices that exacerbated Chile’s already high rates of tuberculosis and infant mortality.

By mapping and confronting the inequities of the food system, scientific experts and medical practitioners constructed the artifice of Chile’s emergent social welfare state. Upon assuming positions of elected power, some designed experimental nutrition programs to first contain the social and political fallout of a long-existent popular food crisis and then consolidate a new social compact from which to move their country forward. Embracing Keynesian-style policies of state economic intervention and regulation, other midcentury state builders backed higher worker wages, the creation of one of twentieth-century Latin America’s most expansive systems of consumer price controls, and the establishment of state-subsidized food stores and restaurants. Health experts and social workers also led the charge to establish special consumer health initiatives that brought basic nutrition habits—the consumption of fruits and vegetables as well as milk and meat—more closely in line with what Chilean farmers actually produced. At times such programs were articulated as a brand of socially inflected economic nationalism or “creole” socialism. In other moments, efforts to improve national nutritional outcomes were decidedly transnational endeavors, involving collaboration with foreign advisers and consultants who encouraged Chile to adopt new agricultural techniques and household cooking practices to meet the country’s social reality.

The post–Second World War era was a particularly active period when it came to building a developmental state that could turn nutritional scarcity into nutritional security. As one of Latin America’s most ambitious agrarian reform projects went into effect in the 1960s, agricultural officials pursued national food sovereignty by promoting trade, investment, and production policies that would lessen the country’s outsized dependence on imported wheat and beef. As two of the most significant items in a bloated national food import budget, these commodities were a financial drain on other urban development initiatives. Therefore, a generation of reformers trained in a range of scientific and social scientific disciplines, including genetics, agronomy, and agricultural economics, dispersed across the Chilean countryside to plant new crop varieties, manage food-processing industries, oversee experimental hog and chicken farms, devise alternative land tenure arrangements, and organize infrastructure improvements that would more efficiently
connect sites of rural production with urbanizing consumer centers. Consumer education campaigns, many of which had been piloted in urban areas a few decades earlier, complemented these production efforts by teaching rural consumers—and particularly women—how to prepare food in ways that mimicked their urban counterparts during times of economic plenty but to embrace values of household thrift and resourcefulness when economic times got tough.

When it came to food, Allende’s democratic revolution represented a continuation of this earlier period. By first instituting a series of wage increases and price controls and then later consolidating a more formalized system of state-led economic planning and community-led food distribution, the UP worked tirelessly to ensure that the anticipated bounty generated by agrarian reform settlements would be earmarked for the urban poor and working classes. Additionally, the leftist coalition guaranteed fair profits and wages to the often undervalued laborers who worked Chile’s foodways. When it came to determining the content and conditions of food production, the revolution promised to give a voice to those who harvested the land and cultivated the sea. A report on Allende’s visit to San Antonio noted that the Chilean government’s investments on the coast would ensure that an “avalanche” of protein-rich merluza would “inundate” grocery stores, open-air markets, and butcher shops throughout Chile. Seemingly mundane food-engineering initiatives, like the state-supported production of salted fish and fish croquettes, represented the UP’s attempt to make good on its promise of nutritional equity.

Throughout late 1971 and into 1972, the UP coalition also established more than two thousand consumer committees in poor neighborhoods around Santiago and other urban areas. Known as juntas de abastecimiento y precios (supply and price control boards), or JAPs, this network of neighborhood consumer watchdog and distribution committees soon became an important channel through which basic foods, including beef, chicken, and fish, entered the peripheral neighborhoods of Santiago and other metropolitan areas. The individuals who staffed the JAPs, many of them women UP militants, were trained by the state’s consumer protection agency and acted as local economic advisers and price inspectors. Through this process, ordinary citizens transmitted new ideas about family nutrition and in-home food preparation to their fellow community members. Harvesting, buying, preparing, and consuming domestically produced foods all became unlikely acts of loyalty to Chile’s socialist revolution.
The daily experience of revolutionary food politics was eloquently captured by pro-UP women like Eloisa Díaz. A leader in a women’s organization in a working-class community near Santiago, Díaz told a Chilean newspaper in March 1972 that the group she helped run in her home community had financed the purchase of some five hundred kilos of frozen fish. Her hope for the second year of the revolution was that familial consumption of merluza would increase as more and more women participated in classes on how best to prepare the fish. “We are helping the Government in its task of teaching the people that fish, one of our most important riches, is the best substitute for beef,” Díaz said. “Eating fish is ten times cheaper than beef, and by increasing familiarity with fish, we’ll be helping the country save foreign exchange.”

Determining what type of food was produced, deciding to whom it was distributed, and finally directing how it was consumed were, in Díaz’s view, all measures of a community’s adherence to the nation and the construction of democratic socialism.

**MAKING FOOD POLITICAL**

From the making of Chile’s Popular Front in the 1930s to the Popular Unity revolution of the early 1970s, _Hungry for Revolution_ reconstructs how decades of struggle over food fueled the rise of one of Latin America’s most expansive social welfare states. In the process, the book stitches together two of the most significant processes in twentieth-century Chile: a growing urban population’s political fight to gain reliable access to basic foodstuffs and the state’s herculean efforts to undo the inequitable power structures that had, by the 1960s, conditioned life in both cities and the countryside. By following a broad cast of historical actors—from trade unionists to communists, women activists to Catholic reformers—the book’s narrative arc follows two generations of Chileans as they sought, sometimes in collaboration and sometimes in conflict with one another, to make basic consumption a fundamental social and economic right and the foundation of a more socially inclusive economic democracy. The book shows how Chile’s food system was a reflection of the inequalities embedded in Chilean social and economic life. It also illuminates the critical role that the politics, science, and economics of food played in shaping the trajectory of the Chilean state and the evolving visions of citizenship and development that such a state promoted for nearly a half century.
By chronicling how popular conceptualizations of an alternative socialist future in Chile grew out of the simple belief that urban workers and their families were entitled to nutritional equality, Hungry for Revolution challenges a tendency in the scholarly literature to associate the politics of consumption in Latin America primarily with the era of economic deregulation and liberalization that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During those years, right-wing governments suppressed socialist movements across the continent. According to an argument that is particularly notable in the scholarship on Chile, politicians’ attention to consumer desires marked the retreat of the interventionist state and the rise of the marketplace as a substitute for the contestation that had accompanied mass politics. In his widely read 1987 book, the conservative Chilean intellectual and politician Joaquín Lavín articulated such a position most clearly when he claimed that the emergence of a supposedly self-regulating, market-based consumer society was the centerpiece of the “silent revolution” that took hold under the iron fist of dictator Augusto Pinochet. In Lavín’s vision of the modern capitalist economy, the state had a minimal role to play when it came to protecting consumer welfare; rather, market forces would dictate the standard of living for Chileans of different social classes.¹⁰

In countering Lavín, Hungry for Revolution reveals how, for much of the mid-twentieth century, consumption in Chile was understood as a social relationship that both generated and reflected larger concerns about the nature of citizenship, the responsibilities of the state, and the fundamental purpose of economic development. As historian Heidi Tinsman has argued, the problem of consumption is deeply embedded in the political fibers of twentieth-century Chile, and as such, it should not be seen as an act that is always or necessarily “reactionary” in nature—even if it often became so during the darkest days of Chile’s Cold War.¹¹ Indeed, a growing body of historical scholarship has demonstrated the unlikely ways that citizens’ embrace of consumer regulations and institutions expanded, not restricted, the state’s administrative purview throughout the twentieth century, thus politicizing, rather than having a dampening effect on, society more broadly. In her analysis of the US New Deal, for instance, Meg Jacobs convincingly showed more than two decades ago how mid-twentieth-century state consumer institutions and consumer laws radicalized popular understandings of democracy, provided new space for citizens to organize themselves politically, and widened the expected boundaries of state regulation. This “dialectical
relationship between state and society” is one that Jacobs calls “state building from the bottom-up.”

Modern Latin America presents numerous corroborating examples of the processes that scholars such as Tinsman and Jacobs describe. In their respective studies, historians Eduardo Elena, Rebekah Pite, Natalia Milanesio, and Jennifer Adair have traced the cultural and political history of food and consumption in twentieth-century Argentina to illuminate how the food and consumer economies were not only highly political spheres, but also arenas in which citizens and the state concretized ideas about social justice, social and economic rights, and gender. In the Mexican context, historians Jeffrey Pilcher, Enrique Ochoa, and Sandra Aguilar-Rodríguez have similarly shown how both cultural and physical concerns about food and nutrition became integral components of Mexico’s revolutionary institutions and the state’s construction of respectable citizenship. In midcentury Brazil, broad-based cost-of-living struggles, as the historian Brodwyn Fischer has demonstrated, became a mode of organization for that country’s political left, particularly the Brazilian Communist Party, which went beyond the workplace to mobilize shantytown residents in urbanizing Rio de Janeiro. In Venezuela, recent scholarship by historians like Alejandro Velasco has revealed how urban popular sectors’ demands for improved urban provisioning of basic collective services and goods—from trash collection to drinking water—grounded radical democratic practices of accountability in the period after the Second World War.

Hungry for Revolution thus fits squarely within a growing body of historical literature on the centrality of consumption matters to the practice of popular politics across the Americas. By distinguishing “consumerism”—that is, a narrow and individual concern with the subjective allure of conspicuous forms of consumption—from a moral and deeply classed notion of “consumption politics,” this work elucidates how poor and working-class citizens became politicized by a perceived absence of everyday household products and services. In turn, this book and others with which it dialogues demonstrate why urban residents, in particular, mobilized as consumers to make economic demands on an incipient regulatory state. It is abundantly clear that as a Cold War dictatorship dismantled the institutions of an interventionist state in Chile, consumption became a key characteristic of neoliberal citizenship during the late 1970s and 1980s. However, in an earlier time period and different political context, the politics of consumption in Chile and around
Latin America was also integral to progressive visions of economic and social democracy. Thus, this book is an attempt to recover the historical relationship between the experience of hunger, citizens’ desire for food security, and the emergence of mass politics in twentieth-century Latin America.

In pushing beyond an exclusive focus on food consumption, *Hungry for Revolution* also explains how persistent concerns about basic food availability in Chile fostered expansive visions of a just and democratic national economy. Scholarship in the field of food studies offers important ways for making sense of these broader economic consequences of food’s ubiquity in modern Chilean history. With their focus on food production, historians of agriculture and food industrialization have underscored how social problems like hunger or malnutrition set the stage for farmers to embrace new agricultural methods, crop types, and processing techniques. Social historians of food have uncovered how food distribution and price-monitoring activities provided openings for political participation, however unequal, to social groups that were historically marginalized in formal politics, like women and the urban poor. Cultural historians of food, meanwhile, have illuminated how states have at times pushed the consumption of certain foods to forge national communities, particularly during moments of political upheaval.

To interrogate the food system is thus to disentangle the political, cultural, social, and economic “webs of life” that sustain the nation-state and global capitalism, as well as visions of a life beyond such modes of political and economic organization.

In Allende’s Chile, we see all of these facets of food politics and more. Drawing upon decades of plans drafted by past governments, the UP revolution sought to turn the popular consumption of nationally produced goods into a key component of a new and revolutionary economic culture. A decade of agrarian reform in Chile blended together a pursuit of mechanized agriculture with the introduction of higher-yield crops and animal species to beat back food inflation and urban hunger. At the same time, the creation of alternative channels for food distribution became an important way for women and shantytown dwellers to shape the direction of Chile’s food revolution at various moments in the mid-twentieth century. Each of the social and economic linkages that connected rural farmland to the marketplace and the marketplace to the household kitchen table became spaces in which organized citizens and the state could reimagine the boundaries of democracy, the economy, and citizenship. This book, then, is an attempt to probe the material inequities that became associated with the Chilean
nation-state and show how food offered a way to envision a political economy that was more just.

PRODUCING AND CONSUMING INEQUALITIES

Following the insights of the eminent food scholar Sidney Mintz, to study food politics is to observe a great contradiction between two competing, and often irreconcilable, citizen demands: a social group’s public desire to have a governing institution regulate what and how food is produced in order to ensure the affordability and quality of essential products, on the one hand, and a rival private wish that an individual’s freedom to choose what and how food is actually consumed never be restricted, on the other hand. In many ways, midcentury Chile offers a canvas on which to see how this “conundrum,” to use Mintz’s words, has historically resolved itself. During its three years in power, the UP devoted great energy to reconciling the tension between a cultural nostalgia for foodways past and the promise of a more egalitarian “culinary modernism.” But as the state increasingly intervened in the production and distribution of basic foods during the 1960s and early 1970s, a chorus of oppositional figures—rural landowners, urban merchants, female consumers—lined up together, united around the claim that their individual preferences for both producing and consuming certain foods should never be constrained, even if the ultimate goal was to generate more equitable nutritional outcomes for the population at-large. Over time the polarization that emerged at sites of food production, distribution, and consumption spawned very distinct visions of economic democracy, citizenship, and the role of the state in economic life. If the food economy could fuel a socialist revolution, Chile in the early 1970s showed that it could also become a foundation of far-right counterrevolution.

A consumer counterrevolution was in many ways enabled by the fact that state food policy often exacerbated insidious inequities and exclusions. By creating mechanisms of food provisioning that were bound up with an individual’s employment status, as many early nutrition-related policies were, the state created a social welfare system that relegated many of the country’s most socially and economically marginal communities to second-class status (if they were included at all). By embracing a quantitative and overly schematic vision of what constituted “proper” food consumption, nutrition experts and agricultural engineers tended to view food as a collection of minerals and
nutrients, whose taste, social meaning, or cultural significance were secondary to its life-sustaining properties. In casting women as the principal source of the country’s poor nutritional habits, agents who staffed new state offices that dealt with food matters reproduced a highly gendered and often racialized characterization of modern masculinity and femininity: while proper masculinity was associated with one’s participation in the traditional workplace and a willingness to abstain from nonvirtuous forms of consumer activity, such as alcohol consumption, to be a respectable woman was to adhere to traditional ideas of domesticity and perform acts of maternal care. Finally, by overemphasizing technical solutions to the country’s crisis—in essence, turning a question about power and politics into a matter of science that was beyond reproach—medical and agricultural experts unwittingly laid the groundwork for those who, in the context of a global Cold War, would later attempt to banish “political” activity and associations from Chilean society.

Chile’s agrarian reform project of the 1960s and early 1970s, which Chilean state officials approached as a regional project that affected not only the spatial organization of the city but also the rural hinterlands, showcased some of the aforementioned contradictions. When urban-based agrarian reformers conflated the objectives of rural land redistribution with the desires of a growing urban consumer class, rather than the living standards of rural laborers, they reinscribed the primacy of urban desires over rural needs. When social reformers fashioned the rural home as one of the only spaces where women could assert themselves politically, they reproduced normative understandings of gender and respectability. Finally, when those involved in building the Chilean state articulated a notion of the “national economy” that was, in contrast to the old export-oriented model, rooted in the ideal of mass consumption, they found it impossible to successfully enact a program of economic development that did not depend on access to foreign markets—especially food imports.

During the final months of the UP revolution, the persistence of contradictions that were embedded in the food economy opened space for certain members of Chile’s counterrevolutionary right to present their own vision of a consumer society. As the state relied upon food imports to make up for domestic shortfalls, large, and increasingly, medium-sized landholders argued against the prevailing view that smaller landholdings would necessarily improve agricultural productivity. Amid growing citizen concerns about food scarcity, food distributors, small merchants, and housewives attacked the Chilean state’s long-standing argument that more active state participation