

EDITOR'S NOTE

The importance of food for historians

The history of food has become especially relevant to Latin American researchers in recent years. Ground-breaking studies have analyzed the discourses of progress that associated indigenous and Afro-American foods with discrimination and backwardness, with the deterioration of subsistence agriculture, with the invisibilization of women and their domestic tasks, with the changing meanings of the concepts of “malnutrition” and “hunger,” with the vicissitudes of vitamins and proteins, as well as with health campaigns to educate the population on “healthy” diets and the growing political power of the commercial food industry (Pohl-Valero, Vargas Domínguez, 2021). Food historians have also shown that this issue is fundamental to understanding how popular culture interacts with medical and religious beliefs in daily life, and also to understanding human beings' relationships with domesticated animals – an important feature of new lines of study being pursued by specialists nowadays. *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* is no stranger to this area of study. Recently, we published a historiographical revision by Ablard (2021) on the historical tendencies in health problems related to food habits in Latin America, stressing the growing impact of malnutrition and obesity. Another study analyzed how food was a concern for the Brazilian military from at least the late nineteenth century on, which adds a national security dimension to the topic (Oliveira Filho, Messias, 2020). A study on the sixteenth century shows how food was essential to the Portuguese colonizers who “discovered” native fruits and used them to market new desserts that were consumed in European diets (Santos, Oliveros, 2017).

Agriculture and agricultural activities involving products intended for human consumption were also linked to the vicissitudes of international cooperation. The Rockefeller Foundation – an agency created in 1913 – prioritized international health until 1951. But from the 1940s on, its leaders became convinced that little could be done to combat the recurrence of endemic and epidemic diseases without first solving the poor nutrition that made people vulnerable. Thus, during the second half of the twentieth century they concentrated on the “Green Revolution.” They sought to encourage the governments of developing countries to use modern technologies to launch their commercial agricultural production and eventually integrate into a capitalist economy. However, in a neo-Malthusian shift, the World Bank and the Ford Foundation blamed the improvements in poor people's diet as counterproductive, since they led to a sharp growth in population in a context of poverty. The alternative was to control birth rates

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in poor societies, sometimes with methods that contravened human rights, such as compulsory sterilization of women. Another memorable moment in this history came with the debates preceding the emergence of the Primary Health Care (PHC) proposal in 1978, when scientists and health workers revalorized nutrition, believing that it was as or more important than providing medical services. However, this PHC proposal contained a certain amount of contradiction, because while it proposed “food supplementation,” it also supported population control methods, covered under the term “family planning.” More recently, the heated discussions about the drawbacks of sugar, fats and animal proteins have captured the attention of historians and the general public, showing that food remains a contemporary issue.

In this issue, thanks to the researchers Sören Brinkmann and José Buschini, we include a dossier on the production, representation and consumption of a food that has been glorified and associated with “good” motherhood in Latin America: animal milk. Alongside the special feature, we are also publishing a review article by Adriana Salay Leme on one of food history’s leading figures, both in Brazil and world-wide: Josué de Castro (1908-1973). He created a wealth of studies and interventions based on the intersection between medicine, sociology, geography and nutrition and, as Leme points out, there are echoes of his work from the early twentieth century on in theorists such as Amartya Sen. Other important facts from Castro’s biography are that during the 1940s – in other words during the populist regime of Getúlio Vargas – he coordinated the implementation of the first “people’s restaurants” and he subsequently chaired the Council of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, known by the acronym FAO, as multilateral agencies were emerging in the 1950s (Bizzo, 2009).

These valuable studies on food, as well as the other articles in this issue, show that historians continue to work on the acute crises and hardships caused in Brazil and throughout much of the Latin American region by the tragedy of the covid-19 pandemic and the insistence on governmental necropolitics, which leads to personal and institutional insecurities. We have faith that these can be overcome using two elements that are central to any social, cultural and political recovery process: hope and historical research. The latter is brilliantly demonstrated in the articles contained in this issue, and I trust the former will be inspired by reading them.

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*Marcos Cueto*ⁱ

ⁱ Science editor, Researcher, Casa de Oswaldo Cruz/Fiocruz.
Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brasil
orcid.org/0000-0002-9291-7232