COOKING MODERNITY:
NUTRITION POLICIES, CLASS, AND GENDER
IN 1940S AND 1950S MEXICO CITY*

INTRODUCTION

As dawn broke in Mexico City’s streets, steamy pots opened to offer the delicious smell of hot tamales and atole. Lupita woke up early that morning to sell tamales in the usual corner of Niño Perdido street in Mexico City’s downtown. In that year, 1947, the construction of the Latin American Tower had just started. Lupita observed the builders digging deeply in the foundations while she sipped her atole and served red and green sauce tamales to her customers. In 1940s and 1950s Mexico City, workers and low-ranking bureaucrats started their day with this popular meal, as they had done since colonial times. Reformers, however, questioned the nutritional value of the working-class diet and considered it as a threat to the construction of modern Mexico.

This article analyzes two public dining halls in 1940s and 1950s Mexico City to examine how people negotiated modernity and how identity, class, and gender were transformed by food practices. It contributes to the fields of welfare, class, and women’s history by discussing how the state imple-

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1 Tamal: Cake made of corn dough stuffed with meats, vegetables, or chili sauce and wrapped in a corn husk or a banana leaf, and steamed. Atole: Corn gruel.


3 Although their official name was ‘National Dining Halls,’ they were usually referred to as ‘Family Dining Halls’ (Comedores Familiares). I refer to them as public dining halls or halls.
mented modernization discourses among the working classes and how women became central to their interpretation. Although scholars have addressed these issues, my work explores modernity from the perspective of food consumption and preparation, which offers a new approach to the complexities and nuances that modernization entailed.4

Since the late nineteenth century Mexico City experienced major transformations as part of a modernization process led by the government of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910).5 After the revolution, modernity took a faster pace and manifested itself through an intense industrialization that increased the opportunities of employment in the manufacturing sector and new means of transportation that facilitated massive migration and urbanization. Economic conditions favored the emergence of new social classes and movements. Meanwhile, the growth of the mass media reinforced a culture of consumerism and encouraged the creation of an imagined community.6 All these changes “transformed the idea of modernity into a lived experience transmitted through new narratives, sounds and images.”7 The analysis of daily experiences shows how ordinary people interpreted and constructed modernity.8 Therefore, cooking and eating provide a viewpoint to explore how men and women from different social classes defined and lived modernity.

Food practices were first discussed as part of state policies during the Porfiriato. In the late nineteenth century, there was a growing concern over the negative influence of certain foodstuffs on social behavior and health.9 The

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4 This essay draws on the work of Jeffrey Pilcher, Julio Moreno, Arnold Bauer, Steven Bunker, and Paulo Drinot on food and consumption practices in Latin America, and from the research by Patience Schell, Nichole Sanders, Katherine Bliss, Claudia Agostoni, Mary Kay Vaughan, Jocelyn Olcott, Ann Blum, Susie Porter, and Stephanie Mitchell on social welfare and women in twentieth-century Mexico.
Porfirian elite perceived the diet of the poor, which was based on maize, beans, and chili, as inferior. Moreover, gente decente (respectable people) considered that buying food from street vendors and eating it with the hands standing or sitting in the streets was unhygienic and uncivilized. In 1901 Julio Guerrero, a sociologist and criminologist, published La génesis del crimen en México. According to Guerrero, poor nutrition was a cause of social ‘backwardness.’ “The lower classes ate tortillas instead of bread, beans, cactus leaves, quelites (greens), zucchinis, unripe or rotten fruit, plenty of chili, little meat, and no eggs.” Guerrero criticized the consumption of pre-Hispanic foodstuffs, such as tamales, and defined them as “an abominable outcome of the Mexican popular cooking tradition.” So Guerrero encouraged the adoption of French and Spanish cuisine to improve Mexican’s diet.

Although the poor continued eating maize, beans, and chilies, elite ideology influenced middle-class women through education. Both private and public schools taught European cookery, being the Escuela de Artes y Oficios para Mujeres (School of Arts and Trades for Women) the best example. Postrevolutionary nationalism, however, transformed food discourse and policies. Mexican food gained recognition among intellectuals such as José Vasconcelos, who supported the teaching of “simple Mexican foods appropriate for the everyday consumption,” but inspectors and teachers preferred elaborated European dishes that remained more popular than national cuisine.

Doctors recognized the nutritional value of basic staples such as tortillas, beans, and chilies; but they advised an increase in the consumption of pro-

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10 Porfirian educator Jorge Vera Estañol described “gente o personas decentes” as an expanding middle class composed often by mestizos, who were “intelligent, instructed and . . . ambitious, who sought to ‘mix with the rich and comfortable classes, to dress like them,’ and who felt a repulsion against all manual or mechanical work.” Quoted in John Lear, Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens: The Revolution in Mexico City (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. 56.


12 Ibid.


14 José Vasconcelos was the Minister of Education from 1921 to 1924. For a discussion on domestic science and cooking lessons in the 1920s see Patience Schell, Church and State Education, p. 125.
Reformers considered that undernourishment and poor hygiene among peasants, indigenous peoples, and the working classes were jeopardizing the progress of the nation. In order to overcome this situation, postrevolutionary governments created welfare programs aimed at changing the daily practices of the needy and the workforce. Since colonial times charity organizations, ran by the Catholic Church, worked to improve the living conditions of the poor. After the Reforma Laws (1859-1863), the state took a more active role, but it was until the Cárdenas’s administration (1930-1936) that welfare was systematized through the establishment of the Secretaría de Asistencia (Ministry of Public Assistance.) In 1943, President Manuel Ávila Camacho ordered the merge of the Ministry with the Departamento de Salubridad (Department of Public Health) creating the Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia (Ministry of Public Health and Assistance MPHA).

The MPHA, along with the recently founded Instituto Nacional de Nutricología (Institute of National Nutrition INN), opened family dining halls to serve the working class. In 1941 President Ávila Camacho inaugurated the first dining hall, which was described as a modernizing project that would improve the living standard of the workforce. In the following pages, I explore the formation of modern gender and class identities and perceptions based on eating practices and nutrition discourses in 1940s and 1950s Mexico City’s dining halls. The first section briefly outlines the history of welfare and food policies in Mexico and the establishment of dining halls. The second section focuses on negotiation between middle-class reformers and working-class comensales (diners), and how modernity was perceived and constructed by both groups. Finally, I analyze the implications that dining halls had for working-class women.

15 Using the discourse of vitamins was new as they were only identified in the 1910s and 1920s. See Dennis Roth, “America’s Fascination with Nutrition,” *Food Review* 23:1 (January-April 2000), p. 35; Walter Gratzer, *Terrors of the Table: The Curious History of Nutrition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).


17 *La obra de “Comedores Nacionales”: reglamento exterior del comedor “Unión Nacional no. 1,”* 1941, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia (hereafter AHSSSA), Beneficencia Pública (hereafter BP), Establecimientos Asistenciales (hereafter EA), Comedores Públicos (hereafter CP), Box 6, File. 4.
Food is an essential element for survival and expression of identity. Through the analysis of cooking and eating habits we can learn not only about people’s way of life, traditions, and social class, but also about their education, gender, and environment. The complex relationships between identity and food in Mexico have been explored in depth by Jeffrey Pilcher. He shows how since colonial times certain foodstuffs, such as tamales, have been identified with the masses, whereas the consumption of European staples symbolized wealth and status. European food was perceived as superior well into the early twentieth century, although the discourse changed to be expressed in ‘scientific’ terms.

In the late 1800s, the Mexican intelligentsia discussed eating habits from the perspective of Neo-Lamarckian eugenics, which influenced public policies. Contrary to European and Anglo-Saxon eugenicists, Latin Americans believed that social improvement was the result of education and environment rather than genetic inheritance and race. Thus, ‘backward’ population could raise their standards by learning the ‘right way of living,’ which entailed an imitation of Western culture.

Mexican eugenics developed during the rule of Porfirio Díaz, whose ideology of ‘order and progress’ improved the country’s economic situation at the expense of exploitation and repression. Liberal policies exacerbated the

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19 The term “lower class” tends to refer to the rural or urban poor who are considered either as peasants or lumpenproletariat. As it has a negative connotation I avoid it as a descriptive category, and only use it in order to reflect the rhetoric of the period. Although the term ‘working-class’ has been identified with blue-collar workers it could also include the peasantry. In 1940s and 1950s Mexico, families who lived in semi-rural areas tended to be both workers and peasants. Therefore, it is difficult to classify them using class categories generated in industrialised countries. For some interesting discussions on class see Alan Knight, “The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution 1900-1920,” Journal of Latin American Studies 16 (May 1984); John Lear, Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens; Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Social Classes in Agrarian Societies (New York: Anchor Press, 1975).

already profound social inequalities and increased hostility towards the ruling elite. Porfirian intellectuals despised indigenous and working-class customs, as for them civilization could only be achieved by adopting European culture. Francisco Bulnes, a Porfirian senator, argued that maize was at the base of indigenous peoples’ ‘backwardness,’ and that progress would follow from the substitution of maize with wheat. In hospitals and in religious and lay schools, instructors taught women European style cooking and discouraged the use of spicy food. These ideas attained the status of official policy in the 1908 education law that held it “indispensable to modify the diet to which (the lower classes) are accustomed.”

For the next fifty years, the science of nutrition and eugenics influenced Mexican leaders in their attempts to control social relations and cultural practices. Postrevolutionary Mexican eugenicists and policy makers believed that a ‘proper diet’ could enhance Mexicans’ health, increase their productivity, and teach civilized manners, which meant adopting Western customs. The rural masses and even many urban dwellers, however, did not always share the perception of European and U.S. superiority regarding culture and food. Moreover, blaming maize for the country’s underdevelopment allowed reformers to evade some of the most important problems of Mexican society: poverty and inequality. Malnutrition was not caused by maize consumption, but by the lack of access to land, education, and economic resources.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the state embarked on a transformation of the country’s material conditions to generate social improvement and development. As a result, welfare was strengthened and reorganized through schools, hospitals, nurseries, hostels, grocery stores, and dining halls. Health policies targeted women as they were in charge of nurturing children. Women were taught domestic science and child-rearing to create professional housewives and mothers who became agents of modernization.

A new generation of middle-class women was formed as nurses and social workers either by Catholic or state schools; allowing them to take an

21 Francisco Bulnes, *El porvenir de las naciones hispano-americanas ante las conquistas recientes de Europa y los Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: Imprenta de Mariano Nava, 1899), pp. 6-19. For a contextualization of Bulnes’s work see Pilcher, *Qué vivan los tamales!*, chapter IV.

22 Patience A. Schell, *Church and State Education*, pp. 53-56.


active role in public spaces which were previously closed to them. These women worked in welfare campaigns to prevent diseases, and instill morality and discipline among the working class by changing their daily habits. Women’s involvement in state welfare paved their way to achieve full citizenship, but at the same time it consolidated patriarchy by strengthening the sexual division of labor and the subordination of women to institutions. Furthermore, class divisions made it difficult for working-class women to identify with the ideals of their middle-class counterparts, which emphasized hierarchy.

According to Susan Besse, in Brazil the state “usurped patriarchal authority within the family, it institutionalized the power of men over women in laws and social policies.” Welfare also enabled Mexican governments to extend their control over private space and reinforce patriarchy. Through welfare, the postrevolutionary state sought to take over the power of the Catholic Church as well. Since the colonial period (sixteenth to eighteenth century), the poor were the target of welfare programs in hands of Catholic organizations. After the Reforma Laws (1859-1863), which restricted the activities of the Church and confiscated its properties, the state assumed responsibility for social welfare.

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25 The School of Nursery and Obstetrics was founded in 1907. La Universidad y la Ciudad (Mexico City: Coordinación de Humanidades-Programa Universitario de Estudios sobre la Ciudad, 1995). In the 1920s, the Escuela Nacional de Enseñanza Doméstica (National School of Domestic Instruction) opened to train women as modern housewives or home economics teachers. Patience A. Schell, Church and State Education in Revolutionary Mexico City, pp. 54-56. On the history of social work see Eli Evangelista Martínez, Historia del trabajo social en México (Mexico City: UNAM-Plaza y Valdes, 2001); Graciela Casa Torres, Teresa Zamora Díaz de León, and Eli Evangelista Martínez, “Social Work Profession (Mexico),” in John M. Herrick and Paul H. Stuart, eds., Encyclopedia of Social Welfare History in North America (London: Sage, 2005), pp. 384-385. On Catholic Church schools training social workers in Brazil see Besse, Restructuring Patriarchy, pp. 84-85.

26 On welfare policies targeting women in other Latin American countries see Asunción Lavrín, Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), chap. 3: Julia Rodríguez, Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), chap. 5; Donna J. Guy, White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead: The Troubled Meeting of Sex, Gender, Public Health, and Progress in Latin America (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

27 Motherhood became part of liberating and oppressive discourses see Lavrín, ibid; Patience A. Schell, Church and State Education; Besse, Restructuring Patriarchy.


29 Besse, Restructuring Patriarchy, pp. 199-200.

30 Pablo Piccato, City of Suspects.

continued working on charity as state programs remained insufficient. By the 1930s, welfare was mainly in the hands of private charity organizations run by upper-class women or Catholic associations.

Anticlerical measures launched by President Plutarco Elias Calles led to the Cristero War (1926-1929) and to the religious conflicts of Lázaro Cárdenas’s government (1934-1940). President Cárdenas created the MPA to improve the organization of the welfare system and to unify welfare commissions established by previous administrations. Cárdenas policies were part of a state-formation process that sought to transfer allegiance from the Church to the nation-state. Nevertheless, Catholic Church loyalty and welfare organizations proved difficult to replace as this paper shows.

In the 1940s, the MPHA along with the INN dealt with the nutrition and health of the growing working classes by carrying out research and implementing welfare programs which reflected the concerns of government reformers. In 1943, the INN opened its doors as part of Mexico City’s General Hospital. After 1944, the MPHA along the INN organized most food welfare programs in Mexico City, hoping to reach the rest of the country once their budget increased. The capital city was a good starting point as it had the necessary infrastructure and needs to become the country’s social laboratory. Industrialization and migration altered Mexico City’s landscape.

and cultural practices. Peasant families moved to crowded rooms inside vecindades (tenement houses) in the downtown area or around the industrial zone that was growing in the outskirts. In 1940, nearly half of Mexico City’s inhabitants were migrants. Furthermore, Mexico City’s population more than doubled between 1940 and 1950 as the next chart shows.

**MEXICO CITY INHABITANTS ACCORDING TO THEIR PLACE OF BIRTH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Residents</th>
<th>Born in the provinces</th>
<th>Born in Mexico City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1,709,547</td>
<td>820,894 48.01%</td>
<td>888,635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2,985,255</td>
<td>1,385,037 46.39%</td>
<td>1,600,218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Doctors from the INN argued that Mexicans’ health and productivity would improve once their protein intake increased and they acquired hygienic habits. According to doctors, the absenteeism of the working class was mainly caused by illness. Even workers with regular attendance, they suggested, had a low productivity because of their physical weakness. Cultural biases notwithstanding, doctors and welfare advocates were right to identify malnutrition as a serious problem. In fact, several diseases caused by nutritional deficiencies, such as parasitosis, diarrhea, enteritis, anemia, and pellagra were among the main causes of death in the nation’s capital as the following figures reveal.

**MAIN CAUSES OF DEATH IN MEXICO CITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1946</th>
<th>1950</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total = 100%</td>
<td>43,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
<td>11,802 26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarrhea and enteritis</td>
<td>7,119 6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liver and biliary duct illnesses</td>
<td>2,760 6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak state and congenital malformation</td>
<td>2,461 5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental or violent deaths</td>
<td>2,116 4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer</td>
<td>1,518 3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
<td>1,393 3.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Diseases were linked to deficient meals and poor hygiene identified with low income households, however, not all the needy enjoyed welfare rights. Policy makers highlighted that state benefits were aimed at ‘honorable families’ who had ‘respectable jobs.’ “Our work is not about sharing out depressing alms among the destitute, but a service that the government gives to those honorable families who fight to find a place in our society.” Reformers stressed that state welfare did not work as charity organizations ran by the Catholic Church, but as a modern institution that educated and facilitated the means to improve Mexicans’ living standards. Welfare advocates aimed at educating the workforce so they would improve their situation by themselves, instead of getting used to state benefits or Church alms. Therefore, only respectable hard-working people had the right to claim welfare benefits; prostitutes, cabaret dancers, drug dealers, thieves, and beggars did not have any right as they were considered as criminals.

The new understanding of welfare based on rights and education prompted the creation of public dining halls to serve working-class families. These halls had their precedent in the 1920s and 1930s dining halls located in shelters and orphanages. The first public dining hall was inaugurated on 21 November 1941, under the presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946). It was established in a building that was part of the Abelardo L. Rodríguez market, located at the corner of República de Colombia Street and Rodríguez Puebla street, in Mexico City’s downtown. President Abelardo L. Rodríguez inaugurated this market on November 1934. The architect, Antonio Muñoz García, designed two twin buildings which were characterized by their space, light, ventilation, and hygienic conditions.

A second dining hall was built in the Anahuac neighborhood, previously called Santa Julia, and was inaugurated on 1 December 1945. This hall was part of the new INN building. Both halls had similar regulations and organ-
ization. At hall no. 2, however, the MPHA introduced some changes based on their experience in hall no. 1. The regulations were clarified, and hall no. 2 offered more services including cooking lessons, dressmaking courses, health and nutrition advice, and an employment agency. Primary sources do not show if these services were also offered at hall no. 1, but probably they were by the late forties.

Both halls were surrounded by poor neighborhoods such as Tepito, La Laguilla, Morelos, and Pensil, where several tenement houses accommodated rural migrants. Most of Mexico City’s newcomers did not have strong family networks that could help them to settle down. Whatever their dreams and family situation might be, on arriving in the city most of them had no skills and were lucky to find work in menial factory jobs or as street peddlers. As a result, they had to live on a meager income which explained their poor housing, nutrition, and health.

**SCIENCE AND WELFARE COME TOGETHER IN A TRULY REVOLUTIONARY WAY**

The MPHA established public dining halls as the first step towards the transformation of working-class eating habits. Reformers’ ideals about the role of the workforce in Mexican society and the importance of food are encapsulated in the halls’ reports and booklet, this latter was addressed to diners, and included the halls’ regulations. An analysis of these sources opens a window into the beliefs of welfare advocates and the response of working-class diners, which together provide insights into the nuances and complexities of modernity, welfare, class, and gender perceptions. According to the halls’ booklet, the principal aim of the dining halls was to improve working-class diet saving them time and money. Reformers argued that by providing nourishing food the state was helping workers “. . . to strengthen their bodies so their work and efforts could bear fruit for their own sake and for the sake of their homeland, and to withstand illness and death, saving their lives for their country, useful lives that are full of promise.”

Eating at the halls was described as an act of patriotism through which responsible citizens would remain healthy and strong to work for the nation. Furthermore, the halls would free women to do paid work either in or out of their homes. Reformers thought that with the extra money made by women families would improve their housing or leisure.

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44 Epigraph La obra de “Comedores Nacionales,” AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File. 4, pp. 1-5.
45 Ibid.
Policy makers assumed that the working class would consider eating healthy meals and giving women time to work as a great benefit and would apply immediately, but that was not the case. It took a year to have hall no. 1 working at its full capacity. Hall no. 1 was designed to serve 1,200 persons, but a month after it was inaugurated 76 employees served only 489 people. Hall authorities had different strategies to attract diners, such as radio spots, fliers, door to door invitations, and even looking for the support of the Catholic Church. Before hall no. 2 was inaugurated, social workers asked for help from the local priest, as he knew the area and its parishioners better and had more authority to convince locals of the benefits of eating at the hall. Bureaucrats had to work along with priests to gain legitimacy, which shows that replacing the Catholic Church proved too difficult for the state. Collaboration between members of the Church and MPHA employees, however, was easier in the 1940s under Ávila Camacho’s administration than during Cárdenas’s government, as the former ended up the confrontation between Church and state and affirmed that he was a believer.

But even with the help of local priests, state officials found that families were initially reluctant to eat at the halls either because it was not appealing to them or because they did not fulfill all the requirements. Eligible diners had to be poor, but ‘decent.’ Not all the adult members of a family were expected to be working at the time of application, but if some of them were found to have a ‘dishonest way of living’ the whole family was barred from the hall. Intolerable occupations were those linked with vice or crime, such as being an alcoholic or working in a “den of iniquity.” Hall regulations emphasized that only respectable, hard-working citizens had the right to use state facilities, therefore they did not tolerate, at least in theory, any deviant behavior among diners.

The application process itself could have discouraged families from requesting a place. Halls only accepted families with more than four members who lived on $100 pesos per month or less. According to the regulations, the head of family, who was normally understood as the paterfamilias,

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46 A year later there were around 1,220 people eating at hall no. 1. Hall no. 2 could serve 1,850 diners. Daily report written by hall manager Faustino Vidal, 3 December 1941 and 24 November 1942, AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File 3.
50 Ibid.
had to write a letter of application stating the name, sex, age, occupation, marital status, place of work, address (families had to live within 13 blocks from the hall), and monthly income, if applicable, of each member of his family. He also had to give the name and address of two referees. For those applicants who were migrants it must have been hard to find suitable referees as they were new to the city, while peddlers would have had difficulties specifying their working address. Moreover, literacy levels were low and paying a scribe required funds.

After an application was submitted, a social worker visited the family’s home to verify their living conditions. Social workers had to specify the diet of the applicant family by stating the amount of different foodstuffs that they had, which was qualified as a low, moderate or high quantity. Social workers had to give account of the hygiene, education, morality, and ethics of family members. These surveys were long and required detailed information, which most of the times was not included. Manuel Cárcamo, administrator of hall no. 2, stated in 1954 “surveys are not completed as they are bothersome and social workers do not have the adequate training to fill them, so most questionnaires remained unanswered in our files.” Flaws in the application process illustrate not only the difficulties in enforcing the regulations in halls, but also the discretionary character of decision-making.

After a family was accepted they received a membership card and paid, in the early 1940s, between $1.80 and $4.20 per family member to eat three meals a day six days a week. The service would be cancelled if the family’s economic situation improved, if the family was absent for three weeks without giving notice, if they gave false information on their application form or if they conducted themselves badly inside the halls. Regulations stated that families could only eat at halls for up to two years, in order to allow the admission of new diners. Reformers thought that after this period working-class families would have improved their living standards and learned how to eat properly. Women took cooking lessons at the halls and were expected to go back to their kitchens and cook nutritious meals. By 1954, however, there were families who had remained up to three years

51 Ibid., p. 44.
52 “Letter addressed to the General Director of Administration at the Ministry of Health and Public Assistance written by Manuel Cárcamo Lardizabal, Chief of Office of the Public Dining Hall no. 2,” 27 April 1954, AHSSA, Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia (hereafter SSA), Subsecretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia (hereafter SubsSyA), Box 47, File. 3.
53 Minimum wages per day in 1941 fluctuated between $1.30 and $2.20, and in 1942 between $1.35 a $2.82. Rafael Ramos Galván, “El problema de la nutrición en México,” Salubridad y Asistencia 1:5 (September-October 1944), p. 35.
eating at hall no. 2, and more than 10 years at hall no. 1.\textsuperscript{54} Having long-term diners show that for some families eating at the halls was more convenient, but also that social workers turned a blind eye to irregularities. Another reason for keeping diners for so long could have been the inability of attracting new diners.

Despite hall regulations stressing that single people could not become diners, by the early 1950s workers, students, and the blind became halls’ main clientele.\textsuperscript{55} In December 1953, hall no. 1 served 3,250 blind people, 2,626 workers, 9,568 students, and 10,790 family members, which shows that the majority of diners were not workers’ families but single workers and students.\textsuperscript{56} By 1954, 79.4 percent of diners in hall no. 2 were students enrolled at the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (Polytechnic National Institute).\textsuperscript{57} When students were on vacation their places were occupied by teachers from the provinces who attended training courses.\textsuperscript{58} The use of halls to cater for students and teachers proves not only that it was difficult to attract families as diners, but also that the middle class captured welfare programs. Furthermore, halls benefited state workers such as teachers and low-ranking bureaucrats, which encouraged state corporativism and clientelism.\textsuperscript{59}

Halls ended up catering for the middle classes rather than the poor, which they were meant to serve. Regulations stated that halls supplied “nutritious, healthy and proper food to poor families at very low prices, an offer impossible to find at other diners, street stalls, or even at home.”\textsuperscript{60} The rhetoric employed to attract possible diners, however, stressed not only the savings that eating at the halls entailed, but also working-class women’s inability to cook healthy dishes. According to policy makers, halls offered a balance between the “scientific knowledge of nutrition and technicians who mastered the art of cooking.”\textsuperscript{61} Hall food was prepared by skilled cooks who, it

\textsuperscript{54} “Letter addressed to the General Director of Administration written by Manuel Cárcamo Lardizabal,” 27 April 1954, AHSSA, SSA, SubsSyA, Box 47, File 3.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} Monthly report of the social work section of hall No. 1, December 1953, AHSSA, SSA, SubsSyA, Box 47, File 3.


\textsuperscript{58} Monthly report of the social work section of hall No. 1, December 1953, AHSSA, SSA, SubsSyA, Box 47, File 3.


\textsuperscript{60} La obra de “Comedores Nacionales,” AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File. 4, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., pp. 6-7.
was asserted, knew how to create healthy, pleasant and attractive dishes; something that untrained cooks were unable to do. Reformers considered that meals cooked without scientific knowledge were inferior as they could threaten people’s health, either because they were not nutritionally balanced or because they were not hygienically made. By stressing the qualities of hall meals reformers implied that working-class women were unable to prepare healthy dishes not only because they lacked of money, but also because they were uninformed about nutrition and hygiene.

At the same time, welfare advocates wanted to communicate that the state appreciated working-class diet and that halls were going to serve simple food, similar to what workers ate at home. The halls’ booklet stressed that a simple meal could be better than luxurious and excessive dishes, an implicit criticism of elite culinary culture. “The consumption of unnecessary food, either in terms of quantity or quality, has to be considered as a luxury, thus many times the poor feed themselves better with their healthy and simple dishes than the rich with their indigestible delicacies.”62 By criticizing elite food practices middle-class reformers legitimized their idea of a proper diet, which had to be both balanced and restrained, rather than recognized the value of popular cuisine as menus show.

The main meal of the day consisted of soup, salad, meat, bread, and fruit, which did not seem alien to working-class palates. Other meals included some foodstuffs found in most working-class tables. Breakfast usually consisted of fruit, eggs or meat, corn gruel or coffee with milk, and bread. For supper diners had black coffee, beans, bread, and leftovers from the main meal (comida), which was common among the working class. Nevertheless, in the early 1940s dinner tended to include dishes that even nowadays would look strange on a set menu served at any popular fonda.63 Diners ate “fish grillé, hamburgers, macaroni a la Bolognese, veal a la juivé, smashed peas, ragout a la bourgeois, meat with eggplant, Scotch meat, Hungarian casse-role, meat rôti, modern grilled beefsteak, and pudding with Corinth raisins” among other delicacies.64 Dishes were inspired in European cookery and even used the word ‘modern’ to define them (filete asado a la moderna), which said more about reformers’ background and aspirations than workers’ taste, diet, and vocabulary.

62 Ibid., p. 6.
63 Cheap diners in Mexico where blue- and white-collar workers eat.
64 Daily menus, 1941-1942, AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File 3. Dishes were not described in daily reports, so it is difficult to know how did Scotch meat (carne escocesa), sopa soferina, pescado sam-faina or other plates were prepared. Looking at 1940s and 1950s cookbooks might help.
Daily meals were designed by the H. Comisión Alimenticia (Food Commission) headed by Dr. Francisco de Paula Miranda, who later on became director of the INN until his death in 1951, when he was succeeded by Dr. José Calvo de la Torre. Even though doctors and nutritionists planned hall menus, the *jefe de cocina* (principal chef) also contributed to selecting dishes. Through daily reports, hall administrators and social workers gave account of diners preferences and how eventually new dishes, or at least new ways of describing them, were introduced. On December 1941, diners at hall no. 1 demanded to eat beans in the morning instead of the evening, and insisted in having enchiladas. Although ten years after halls opened enchiladas were still not served, menus included less sophisticated dishes such as vegetable soup, Mexican style rice, Mexican zucchinis, Mexican lentils, Mexican chickpeas (garbanzos), *picadillo*, beef stew, baked fish, *pipián*, and meat with green chili sauce. The addition of the word “Mexican” was increasingly used to make food appeared more familiar to diners. The ‘Mexicanization’ of dishes revamped the halls’ menu with a notion of nationalism in which modernity merged science and technology with tradition.

Even though Mexican dishes were served, diners kept asking for enchiladas. But tortilla-based dishes were not so easy to prepare as the availability of tortillas entailed technical difficulties. As a result, almost every meal was accompanied with bread instead of tortillas, the base of the average Mexican’s diet. If tortillas were served, each diner had only two or three per meal; hardly enough for a family used to basing their diet on maize. The absence of tortillas, although influenced by the discourse of wheat superiority still present in the 1940s, was mainly caused by poor technology and low budget. Halls would have to employ several women to make fresh tortillas for every meal, which would have entailed additional costs. Replacing mothers’ fresh tortillas was an expense that the state was unwilling to undertake. Furthermore, reformers wanted to modernize traditional cooking tech-
niques using state-of-the-art machinery and methods, so neither *metates* nor *comales* were welcomed. \(^{73}\)

Mechanical mills capable of grinding the moist corn dough were available in the 1920s and 1930s. Although tortilla-making machines developed in the 1940s and 1950s, it was not until the 1970s that they became ubiquitous. \(^{74}\) In 1942, hall no. 1 introduced mass-produced tortillas. As this technology was in its early stages, the results were not always edible and those who ate at the halls ended up acting as guinea pigs. Faustino Vidal, hall manager, reported that “the quality of machine-made tortillas was satisfactory, and improving them was a matter of getting used to the machine.” \(^{75}\) Even though the quality was acceptable, the quantity remained insufficient. A decade after, in 1953, hall no. 2 served tortillas only at dinner and some weeks passed without having even one tortilla. \(^{76}\)

Eating at halls implied a deep transformation in diet and family practices. The halls’ booklet recognized that substituting the family table for a public dining hall implied a change in the customs of Mexicans, “who were very fond of their homes.” \(^{77}\) Reformers, however, did not state how they were going to facilitate diners the adoption of new habits and diets. Moreover, hall regulations were strict as diners had to arrive on time, and be both clean and tidy in their appearance. Opening hours were: breakfast 7 am to 9 am (divided in four sessions of 30 minutes each), dinner 12 pm-3 pm (divided in four sessions of 45 minutes each), and supper 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm (divided in four turns of 30 minutes each). \(^{78}\) Families had between 30 and 45 minutes to eat, which diners could have found insufficient. Once hall no. 2 opened, timetables were extended to an hour for each meal divided in two sessions.

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\(^{73}\) Metate: Saddle quern used to grind maize. Comal: earthenware or metal griddle to cook tortillas.


\(^{75}\) Daily report written by the dining hall manager Faustino Vidal, 4 December 1941, AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File 3. Hall no. 2 had a tortilla-making machine since its inauguration. *Salubridad y Asistencia* V:13 (January-February 1946), p. 38.

\(^{76}\) Daily menus and reports, AHSSA, SSA, SubsSyA, Box 47, File 3

\(^{77}\) *La obra de “Comedores Nacionales,”* AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File 4, p. 7.

\(^{78}\) “Reglamento de los comedores familiares de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia,” *Salubridad y Asistencia* V:13 (January-February 1946), p. 44.
On entering the hall, diners had to leave their *bultos* (belongings) and outerwear in the wardrobe, they had to wash their hands in communal washbasins and go to the counter where they showed their cards and received a tray with their cutlery and food. After eating, diners had to return their tray with all the dishes and cutlery in order to be able to leave. Before going out, diners had to wash their teeth in public with toothbrushes that halls provided. It is not clear if diners left their toothbrushes in the halls or took them back home. Diners had to behave themselves and follow rules enforced by state employees and social workers. All these measures increased the gap between ‘hearth and home’ and dining halls.

Teaching impoverished workers middle-class manners and morals was far more complex than getting them used to hall food and rules. Welfare advocates did not consider that even though the working class adopted middle-class customs, diners could not afford to keep them back home. While the MPHA tried to improve working-class daily life, it also nourished the stigma attached to the needy. Diners did not have the right to privacy and were treated as if they were in need of guidance. Thus, eating at the hall had a negative connotation as being a diner implied that you were poorer that those who ate at home. Mrs. Bárbara Quijas, interviewed for this project, was born and grew up in Tepito. She recounted that neither she nor her family went to the dining hall because “only the lower classes ate there.” Consequently, whether people did or did not use this facility generated status perceptions within the community. Furthermore, the halls’ booklet portrayed diners as uneducated, messy, untidy, and prone to crime. No doubt humiliating for many was the fact that the crockery and cutlery had to be counted in public upon its return before diners could depart from the halls, leaving no doubt that the government viewed them all as potential thieves.

There were a few similarities between halls and home, reformers suggested. In the halls families ate together, with a limit of one family per table, in order to maintain “domestic spirit and family unity.” Children under the age of four, however, had to be left at the hall’s crèche while families were eating. It was not clear why children ate apart, but mothers could have found this requirement intrusive while children may have felt distressed.

79 A deprived neighborhood near hall no. 1.
80 Barbara Quijas, interview by the author, Mexico City, 1 July 2005.
81 Even though I did not find a specific reference to the theft of crockery and cutlery at hall no. 1 or no. 2 this was reported as a common practice in student dining halls. See AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File 2.
82 *La obra de “Comedores Nacionales,”* AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File 4, p. 7.
83 Ibid., p. 12.
Although the MPHA tried to reproduce a family environment, the experience of eating at the halls was far from ordinary. People had to adhere to a timetable with no relation to their time perceptions, which were probably closer to an agrarian pace. Even though by 1946 diners had an hour to eat, they still had little time to engage in after-dinner conversation.

Diners had to learn middle-class manners, such as using cutlery instead of using tortillas to scoop up food, and eating international cuisine even if they did not like it. Doctors recognized that working-class families find it difficult to change their humble tables for hall food. In 1946, at the first national welfare conference, Dr. Ramiro J. Ferrera Rojas said “we have realized that there are families who remain reluctant to eat at public dining halls despite their economic hardship, thus I believe that it would be more
humane to help them through subsidies. In their enthusiasm for improving working-class diet, welfare advocates underestimated the importance of people’s preexisting practices and ideas, and assumed that what dining halls offered was not only what people needed, but also what they wanted. Overall, diners experienced several changes ranging from the content of their meals to the way they were supposed to eat them. This transformation entailed the intrusion of the state into the family kitchen, traditions, and customs; which caused a profound alteration in dietary habits through the introduction of new ingredients, cooking techniques, and even processed food.

The MPHA hoped diners would disregard the inconveniences of eating at the halls and focus instead on the benefits this program brought to their family’s health and welfare. Perhaps middle-class reformers expected too much if we consider that they portrayed the working class as unable to decide what was best for them. Furthermore, accepting the halls’ regulation undermined the authority of those who had traditionally made the choices. By becoming diners, the paterfamilias was handing part of his power over to the state, while women ceded their control over the kitchen to male cooks.

Photographs show men in charge of cooking in the halls. Even though women worked in the kitchen, men were the chefs while women worked as kitchen porters. The image above, for instance, portrays men wearing chef’s hats and ties while mixing ingredients, whereas women were washing dishes or chopping vegetables. In hall no. 1 men were also in charge of serving food to diners, which emphasized the difference between halls and home.

84 Primer Congreso Nacional de Salubridad y Asistencia 1946, AHSSA, AHSSA, SSA, SubsSyA, Box 7, File 5, p. 8. The sale of subsidised food began under the Cárdenas’s administration. On 12 August 1938, Cárdenas decreed the foundation of the Comité Regulador del Mercado de Subsistencias (Regulating Committee of Basic Foodstuff) to control the price of basic foodstuffs. In 1941, the Committee was transformed into Nacional Distribuidora y Reguladora S.A. (National Distribution and Regulation Society NADRYSYA), which was also in charge of distributing subsidised food. On 13 July 1949, Compañía Exportadora e Importadora Mexicana S.A. (National Imports and Exports Company, CEIMSA) substituted NADRYSYA. By 1950 there were 2,500 CEIMSA shops located mainly in Mexico City. See Hugo Azpeitia Gómez, Compañía Exportadora e Importadora Mexicana S.A. (1949-1958) Conflicto y abasto alimentario (Mexico City: CIESAS, 1994); Antonio del Bajio, Crisis alimentarias y subsistencias populares en México, vol. II (Mexico City: Leche Industrializada CONASUPO SA de CV, 1990); Gloria Hernández Fujigaki, CNC-CONASUPO: 50 años de lucha por la alimentación (Mexico City: Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares, 1988).

85 Although it was not part of daily menus, soft drinks and candies were sold at low prices in vending machines inside the halls. La obra de “Comedores Nacionales,” AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File 4, p. 8.

86 Ibid., p. 7.

87 Photograph of the kitchen and the counter of hall no. 1 in Baz, Informe de labores presentado al H. Ejecutivo de la Unión 1941-1942. Hall no. 2 photograph see Salubridad y Asistencia V: 13 (January-February 1946), p. 53.
Having male cooks and employees gave an image of professionalism. On February 1942, however, the manager of hall no. 1 reported that an inebriated cook was forced to leave; which shows that keeping a disciplined workforce was another challenge that hall authorities faced. On the other hand, the absence of female employees fed a negative image of women portraying them as untrained. A 1946 photograph shows women serving food at the counter of hall no. 2, which illustrates how the MPHA had learned from their experience at hall no. 1. Having men cooking at the halls’ kitchens, however, gave account of the reformers’ and bureaucrats’ lack of understanding and their failure to recognize women’s cooking experience.

**TRANSFORMING WOMEN’S DAILY LIFE**

Reformers considered that solving working-class deficiencies was possible through education and welfare, focusing particularly on women as they were in charge of raising children. Hall regulations reveal that although

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88 Daily report written by the dining hall manager Faustino Vidal, 9 February 1942, AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File 3.
women’s role was essential, reformers did not acknowledge working-class women’s abilities and experience. According to welfare advocates, working-class mothers did not have the necessary knowledge and means to raise disciplined, well-mannered, productive, and healthy children. Therefore, the state assumed women’s main activities at home: cooking.

Leaving behind the kitchen implied a deep change in women’s daily life and self-perception. Women abandoned the only space where they had authority, and gave up some of the most significant tasks of a housewife and mother: feeding her family. Moreover, reformers did not consider that through cooking women expressed their love, affection, and creativity. Women in peasant societies earned respect and admiration based on their dexterity to prepare tortillas and their ability to cook traditional meals such as mole and tamales, which involved arduous work. Single women who were skilled cooks had more possibilities of getting married. Even in urban Mexico a good meal was considered to be essential in keeping men at home.

As Jeffrey Pilcher points out, labor in the kitchen gave women status and identity within the family and the community. Cooking as a women-centered and role-affirming communal ritual empowered women as the carriers of tradition. Middle-class reformers, however, underestimated working-class women’s culinary knowledge and tradition. The halls’ brochure stressed that their meals satisfied the strictest standards of science and art, resulting in a balance difficult to find at home. Furthermore, hall employees were described as technicians, against whom ordinary women could not compete.

Policy makers believed that halls would “free mothers from the slavery of the kitchen, allowing them to devote those hours to a job that will help their family to live on a more comfortable budget.” Nevertheless, most rural women who migrated to Mexico City were unskilled and made a living as domestic servants, street peddlers or as factory workers. These jobs gave women very little control over their time, making them difficult to organize all their meals under halls’ strict timetables, which further reduced their possibility to remain as diners. Regulations stated that women could also supplement the family budget by engaging in paid work at home. In this way, women

89 Chili pepper sauce or stew often made with a variety of ground nuts, spices and chocolate.
92 La obra de “Comedores Nacionales,” AHSSA, BP, EA, CP, Box 6, File. 4, p. 7.
93 Ibid., p. 6.
could be breadwinners without threatening traditional gender roles. In hall no. 2, women were encouraged to work as laundresses or seamstress by offering dressmaking lessons, and had access to washing and ironing machines.

Hall regulations reinforced patriarchy as they encouraged women to work at home or in suitable female jobs. Although halls offered a crèche for working women, this benefit was available only for those who worked in factories or offices and did not include self-employed women or domestic servants, which represented a majority among the needy. Furthermore, men had to apply for this service so women could not make this decision by themselves. Therefore, halls’ policy stressed that men and husbands had the final word in women’s choices. Reformers also strengthened hierarchy by emphasizing that working-class women needed to be educated by professional doctors, nutritionists, and social workers; whose scientific training was deemed better than working-class women’s experience and traditional knowledge. Therefore, women had to take classes on hygiene, home economics, dietetics, and culinary techniques.

Cooking lessons were opened to young women and mothers. The course was run by Dr. Juana Navarro García, a middle-class professional woman, and Dr. Joaquín Quintín Olascoaga. The former studied at the Institute of National Nutrition of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the latter was one of the most prestigious nutritionists in Mexico, co-founder of the Mexican INN and the project of public dining halls. The cooking training consisted of 70 hours over a period of 35 days. In the course, women received information about the physical and chemical properties of food, how to cook simple meals, and how to prepare healthy meals for their families. The MPHA stated that cooking lessons could be extended to a six-month period if women showed an interest in the subject and registered to the courses. Later on, evening lessons would also be available for those who worked in the morning. “Cursos de Cocina Familiar en el Departamento de Nutriología,” Salubridad y Asistencia VIII:2 (March-April 1948), pp. 117-122.
family and baby meals, and how to select and buy groceries. Reformers stressed that halls were a temporary measure as eventually women would go back to their home kitchen with a professional training that would enable them to look after their family’s health and nutrition.

Cooking lessons concentrated on the use of milk, sugar, eggs, meat, vegetables, and cereals as these staples, doctors said, were missing from the average working-class diet. This absence was believed to be caused mainly by ignorance. Welfare advocates assumed that once women had learnt the importance of nutrition and how to cook those foodstuffs they would eat them. Most of the recipes taught were dishes that working-class women had learnt from their mothers, such as maize or rice gruel, coffee with milk, meatballs, mole, stewed beans, lentils, rice, tamales, and tortilla soup. Reformers, however, included recipes such as custard pudding, Spanish stew, salads with mayonnaise, meat croquettes, eggs à la Parisien, white sauce, sauté vegetables, noodles, and fruit pies. Reformers, however, included recipes such as custard pudding, Spanish stew, salads with mayonnaise, meat croquettes, eggs à la Parisien, white sauce, sauté vegetables, noodles, and fruit pies. Reformers, however, included recipes such as custard pudding, Spanish stew, salads with mayonnaise, meat croquettes, eggs à la Parisien, white sauce, sauté vegetables, noodles, and fruit pies.101 It seems that dieticians did not consider high prices and the lack of proper technology in designing the content of cooking lessons. Working-class households had neither ovens to prepare dishes such as roasted beef or fruit pies nor refrigerators to keep milk, butter or meat. Doctors deemed themselves to be performing their duty by giving women the training to become professional housewives, even though they lacked the funds to live up to middle-class reformers’ expectations.102

By offering training and access to halls’ facilities, the MPHA not only sought to improve working-class living conditions, but also to transform women into efficient and productive housewives. The MPHA presented itself as a judge who assessed women’s behavior either to punish or reward them. Reformers stated that when savings were foolishly squandered or when women spent their time gossiping instead of doing housework, families could be suspended from halls.103 On the other hand, the MPHA awarded women through contests in which those mothers who had made the greatest effort to improve their family’s living conditions, by having a clean house and tidy children, and who were most concerned about the future of their offspring received a congratulations letter. Moreover, their story was

101 Ibid., pp. 118-121.

102 In 1955 the average minimum wage was $7.08 pesos in urban areas, while the cheapest refrigerator, a Gilvert, cost $2,485 and a IEM could be bought paying $50 per week. An Across gas stove cost $1,275 pesos and a Birtman blender $475. All these prices were excessively high for working-class budgets. For average minimum wages see Presidencia de la República, 50 años de Revolución Mexicana en cifras (Mexico City: Presidencia de la República-Nacional Financiera SA, 1963) p. 112. For domestic technology advertisements and prices see Excelsior: el periódico de la vida nacional, 2 May 1955.

published in a newspaper stressing their virtues as good mothers and citizens.\textsuperscript{104} Children got a diploma for being hard-working, disciplined, and obliging; meanwhile fathers who fulfilled their duties received a big round of applause in a simple ceremony at the halls.\textsuperscript{105}

Women’s awards show the extent to which the state valued mothers’ efforts to improve family manners and morals over those of fathers and children. Welfare advocates realized that in order to change customs, practices, and attitudes they had to appeal to mothers; in doing so, the state reinforced traditional gender roles. Even though women temporarily lost their influence and power over daily cooking, their responsibility as mothers and housewives was reaffirmed. Hard-working women gained public respect in a new community of diners and hall employees, and even national recognition through the mass media. As Benedict Anderson notes, newspapers and magazines came to represent a national community, which in this case recognized the importance of being a committed mother.\textsuperscript{106}

Postrevolutionary governments worked alongside the media to create an image of women as mothers.\textsuperscript{107} In 1922 the newspaper \textit{Excelsior} invited Mexicans to celebrate Mother’s Day on May 10.\textsuperscript{108} State officials supported the motion, and used it as a way to promote their ideology regarding motherhood. By the 1950s, \textit{Excelsior} rewarded women who had borne more children. In 1955, Paula García de Medina, from Zacatecas, won with 20 children. She was awarded $1,000, a medal, a certificate, and a gas stove.\textsuperscript{109} The mass media portrayed women as ‘holy mothers,’ who were worshiped as they represented an ideal of hard-work and self-sacrifice, being cinema the best example.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{104} By 1946, women did not have full citizenship as they could not vote for presidential elections. In 1947, President Miguel Alemán granted women the right to vote at municipal election. But women’s suffrage at a national level was not decreed until 1953 by President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. See Julia Tuñón Pablos, \textit{Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), pp. 105-106.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Salubridad y Asistencia} V:13 (January-February 1946), p. 8.

\textsuperscript{106} Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}.


\textsuperscript{108} Marta Acevedo, \textit{El diez de mayo}, vol. 7 (Mexico City: SEP/Cultura, 1970).

\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Excelsior}, 10 May 1955.

\textsuperscript{110} Cinema also represented the other side of the coin, lost women who suffered as a result of the path they have followed. See Diana Bracho, “En el cine mexicano: ¿Y en el papel de la mujer, Quién?,” \textit{Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos} 1:2 (Summer 1985); Julianne Burton-Carvajal, “Mexican Melodramas of Patriarchy: Specificity of a Transcultural Form,” in Ann Marie Stock and Ambrosio Fornet, eds., \textit{Framing Latin American Cinema: Contemporary Critical Perspectives} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Julia Tuñón, \textit{Mujeres de luz y sombra en el cine mexicano: la construcción de una imagen (1939-1952)} (Mexico City: Colegio de México-Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1998).
Women who did not embrace traditional living standards were perceived as unnatural mothers. Motherhood, however, became a discourse that enabled women to claim political rights and access to the public realm. Some women deployed the rhetoric of motherhood, which highlighted that mothers were in charge or reestablishing social order, to assume public roles and mobilize female organizations. These new roles, according to Besse, were an “extension of women’s innate abilities that did not emancipate women, but created an illusion that helped to perpetuate male dominance.” Nevertheless, women won some battles such as the fight for universal suffrage in 1953.

CONCLUSION

The MPHA sought to change working-class eating habits and to transform cultural practices and establish new values among the masses, who they considered to be uneducated and prone to crime. Members of the working class were seen as in need of supervision and guidance. Women were thought to require advice on how to instill desirable values in their children. Ideal diets, manners, and morals were formulated by middle-class doctors who were influenced by eugenics and the science of nutrition. Along health concerns, however, reformers were worried about working-class behavior and morality, so they infused state welfare programs with middle-class values such as discipline, hard-work, and punctuality.

The traditional perception of motherhood was reinforced as the MPHA targeted women in their campaign to improve living standards. Although

111 Evelyn Stevens explains the cult of women’s spiritual superiority through the concept of “Marianism,” which implies that women aspire to be like the Virgin Mary, personified in Mexico by Our Lady of Guadalupe. Thus, women show spiritual strength through abnegation. See Evelyn P. Stevens, “Marianism: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America,” in Ann Pescatello, ed., Female and Male in Latin America (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1973), pp. 94-95; Gertrude Matyoka Yeager, Confronting Change, Challenging Tradition: Women in Latin American History (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994).


reformers considered that women’s participation at home was more important than men’s, they did not seek to undermine patriarchy. The professionalisation of housewives and mothers was not intended to emancipate women, but in Mary Kay Vaughan’s words, to “subordinate the household to the interest of national development.”114 Mothers were to be educated in scientific, hygienic household management and child-rearing in order to produce healthy, efficient, and patriotic citizen-workers. Thus, postrevolutionary governments intervened in the private sphere trying to gain control over it in the name of progress and modernity.

An analysis of the halls shows how the cultural gap between reformers and the masses was a difficult obstacle to overcome. For middle-class reformers, the adoption of certain values would lead to the modernization of the country. Meanwhile, the lower and working classes had little appreciation of the benefits that discipline, punctuality, and hygiene would bring them. Diners did not always agree with new ways of eating and living. People with rural backgrounds thought that it was inappropriate and unsuitable for women to work outside their homes, and they considered cooking to be women’s responsibility. Moreover, lack of education, training, and cultural barriers made finding a salaried job difficult for women. Even though diners might consider embracing new habits and manners, they were hindered by low wages.

Diners resisted the culture that was being imposed on them through day to day negotiations, as changes in menus have shown, but also by leaving the halls. By the mid-1950s, halls fed basically students, the blind, and single workers who found convenient to eat there as their schools, work, or homes were in the immediate environs of halls. Working-class families, however, became less numerous and halls lost their original spirit. In 1954 the administrator of hall no, 2, Manuel Cárcamo Lardizabal, wrote a letter addressed to the undersecretary of the MPHA stating that the project of the public dining halls was a complete failure.

After five years as hall administrator, Cárcamo denounced several deficiencies, such as the lack of any follow-up after families left the halls. He criticized the MPHA for not monitoring whether diners had benefited from the halls or if they had changed their eating habits as a result of using them. According to Cárcamo, it was never known if halls achieved their goal of transforming and improving working-class daily life. Cárcamo argued that the MPHA was acting

as an “irresponsible mother who was neglecting her children.” Furthermore, he pointed out that the main cause of malnutrition was poverty. He wrote that even though habits, education, culture, and availability of goods influenced the consumption patterns of the poor, as soon as they had some money they bought milk, eggs, or meat. Hence, low wages and high prices were at the base of Mexico’s nutrition deficiencies rather than mere ignorance.

Cárcamo’s criticism reveals that regulations were difficult to enforce due to reformers’ incomprehension of working-class culture and living conditions, constrains in halls’ budget, and lack of personnel. Regulations reflected an ideal plan created by middle-class reformers while practice revealed a far more complex reality. Cárcamo, himself from a working-class background, said “in my house it is impossible to eat as diners do in this hall. My family cannot have eggs three times per week, fruit twice a day and fish once a week; however, we have a healthy appearance.” Cárcamo suggested that hall meals were excessive and did not solve nutrition problems in the long term. He considered that an increase in wages was the main solution to poor nutrition. “In my opinion, and nutritionist pardon me for what I am saying, habits, education, culture, money, and availability define our diet. The poor have a deficient diet because they lack of money, so as soon as their economic situation improve, they buy milk, eggs, meat, or a can of sardines.” Cárcamo’s criticism was a result of his daily experience at hall no. 2, and could also be expressing his dissatisfaction with low wages.

Middle-class reformers in the 1940s and 1950s thought that changing daily practices and diet would result in a long-term transformation of working-class customs, habits, perceptions, and consumption patterns. Poor families could live up to middle-class expectations if women learnt how to manage their households and encouraged savings and hard work among family members. Hence, MPHA discourse regarding nutrition stressed education, home economics, and subsidies over structural changes and economic disparities. Even though policy makers highlighted the importance of food availability, they did not recognize low salaries, social and gender inequalities as a cause of malnutrition. Moreover, the efforts of middle-class doctors, nutritionists, and social workers to transform poor women into respectable and professional housewives and mothers helped to reinforce hierarchy and paternalism.

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116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
Public dining halls aimed at replacing the family kitchen without considering the importance that this space had for women’s identity and self-perception, undervaluing their work while unable to adequately replace it. Reformers ignored family tradition and working-class women’s experience by considering home cooking as inferior to hall food. Although halls’ administrators and employees implemented some changes as a result of day to day negotiations, bridging the gap between theory and practice was difficult. As Cárcamo’s critique shows, halls and nutrition policies resulted ineffective in improving Mexican’s diet and living standard in the long run.118

EPILOGUE

The Comedor Nacional no. 1 still exists; however, it only serves around 100 people per day. The majority of diners are the elderly, handicapped, and people who suffered from terminal diseases. The kitchen has not experienced deep transformations; they have their 1940s cooking pots and stoves, although most of them are not in use. Half of the hall is occupied by a nursery. The Comedor Familiar no. 2 was closed nine years after being inaugurated due to budget reductions. It seems that there were only two family dining halls as part of the project of National Dining Halls. This suggests that halls were an unsuccessful experiment which was not implemented elsewhere. Nevertheless, in the 1940s and 1950s food was also distributed through Centros de Trabajo y Asistencia (Work and Assistance Centers), whose kitchens provided take away meals for poor families. There were other dining halls that served mainly students or that fed beggars, but apparently they were not as big and ambitious as family dining halls.119

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118 The analysis of the school breakfast program and subsidised shops could help us to build up a clearer picture of changes in the rhetoric of food and on how people used welfare.

119 Although further research is needed, I found that in 1947 there were 476 Work and Assistance centers in Mexico City, each of them offered two meals per day to an average of 100 people. Meals cost between 10 and 20 cents. AHSSA, SSA, SubSyA, Box 8, File 15. In 1950 there were four dining halls catering for university students. Dirección de asistencia social, AHSSA, SSA, SubSyA, Box 23, File 6. There were soup kitchens in Centros Femeninos de Trabajo (Women’s Work Centers) and another dining hall in Vértiz. These halls served far less diners than family halls. In 1952, both hall no. 1 and 2 served 2,766 people per day, while Vértiz hall catered for 250 people and a student dining hall nearby the Faculty of Veterinary Science served 70 students every day. Morones Prieto, Memoria de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia Pública Sexenio 1952-1958, p. 281.