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Inequality and Nutritional Transition in Economic History: Spain in the 19th–21st Centuries

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During the early nineteenth century, Western Europe exhibited a low per capita total calorie intake, primarily relying on starchy staples, which contributed two-thirds or more of the total calorie consumption. However, a significant dietary transformation occurred throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries due to increased food production supplemented by imports, facilitating a more varied diet. Higher real incomes following industrialization enabled the acquisition of pricier food items, such as meats and sugars.

“Inequality and Nutritional Transition in Economic History” is a comprehensive compilation of 10 studies that aim to understand how the transition was initiated in Spain and how the distribution of food changed across different groups. In doing so, the editors of the book—Francisco Medina-Albaladejo, José Miguel Martínez-Carrión, and Salvador Calatayud—rely on studies based on extensive historical sources as proxies for food consumption before the 1960s, when food surveys became widespread. The book delves less into the supply side of this transition (food prices) and fo-

cuses more on demand forces (the quantities consumed). Additionally, the editors go one step further by presenting evidence on how changing diets impacted health and well-being, as indicated by changes in the body composition.

About two-thirds of the book, encompassing six chapters, delves into the evolution of diets over time. Chapter 1 examines changes in diet across time, drawing insights from hospital diets to evaluate shifts in eating habits. Chapter 3 investigates gender-based variations through the examination of diverse national databases. The exploration extends to the dietary changes in the Spanish Army (Chapter 6), rural food surveys (Chapter 7), and more contemporary settings post-mid-1960s, when official statistics became available. Chapter 8 focuses on the shifting consumption patterns of dairy products, including milk, meat, and alcoholic drinks, while Chapter 10 examines alterations in diet triggered by the 2007/2008 financial crisis. The remaining four chapters contribute to the anthropometric history discipline, exploring heights

in urban and rural settings (Chapter 2), in the Canary Islands (Chapter 4), in Madrid (Chapter 5), and lessons derived from changes in the body mass index (Chapter 9). Notably, while maintaining a chronological order, the book skillfully integrates studies on dietary intake with outcomes reflected in body composition. Overall, the book offers a well-balanced mix of studies and includes an introduction that contextualizes the dietary landscape of Spain.

The book has been written by a truly interdisciplinary team of experts, involving 29 scholars from different areas such as sociology, demography, economic history, and even medicine, with a shared goal: unveiling the changing diets in the Spanish territory. Although Spain did not exhibit any exceptional characteristics in the nutritional transition, it lagged behind like other Mediterranean countries, the editors contend that it possesses rich sources capable of revealing its origins (page 2). Indeed, the book is commendable for its use of historical sources, which help infer dietary changes over time.

The book excels in utilizing historical sources to narrate the past, bridging the gap to modern times, and linking changing access to food with the principles of biology and the work of other disciplines such as anthropometric history. However, a potential critique emerges as one delves into its content: even without specialized expertise in the subject matter, the findings presented may not appear notably innovative or groundbreaking, particularly regarding issues of inequality. For instance, it is mostly found that until very recent times, more affluent groups enjoyed a more abundant and varied diet (including meat, etc.) while allocating a lower percentage of their total income to purchase

them. In contrast, middle- and working-class groups spent a more sizable part of their income on food and consumed a less rich and diverse diet. Furthermore, disparities in food access were notably pronounced for women and children. Despite the absence of groundbreaking revelations, the book admirably captures the intricacies of the Spanish experience, spanning from the challenges of industrialization to the upheavals of the Spanish Civil War and post-war era, including the autarchic policies of Franco's regime, the transition to democracy, and culminating in the 2007/2008 financial crisis.

Regarding inequality issues, and aiming to inspire new research, the book also brings forth intriguing questions that remain unexplored. For instance, did a nutritional 'Kuznets curve' exist, peaking during the first half of the 20th century? How does it relate with other countries that entered and exited the nutritional transition earlier, potentially due to greater industrialization, more open economies, and higher income levels? Indeed, while the book effectively describes the Spanish context in the introduction, it perhaps missed the opportunity to incorporate a concluding chapter that connects the Spanish case to neighboring countries, analyzing Spain's position within the broader European context. Nonetheless, beyond these and other questions inspired by the book, it provides a comprehensive and meticulous analysis of the nutritional transition in Spain. The thorough reconstruction of historical trends is truly commendable and serves as an invitation for further research in other countries.

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