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Beneficial Nutrition in Galicia at the End of the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Santiago de Compostela

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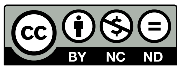

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the emergence and development of the Economic Kitchen of Santiago de Compostela within the broader context of social assistance and nutritional change in late nineteenth-century Galicia. Drawing on archival documentation, contemporary press sources, and institutional records, the study analyses the dietary model promoted by these charitable dining halls and compares it with the habitual diet of the urban working classes and the poor. The research highlights both the limitations and improvements introduced by this initiative, including the provision of affordable meals, improved food quality through regulated procurement, and the introduction of certain dietary innovations such as dairy consumption and diversified protein sources. Particular attention is given to the distinctive role of ecclesiastical management in Santiago, which enabled the integration of the Economic Kitchen into a wider Catholic assistance network serving schools, charitable institutions, prisoners, and pilgrims. The findings suggest that these institutions played a significant role in alleviating nutritional deficiencies among vulnerable populations and contributed to the modernization of social welfare practices in Galicia at the turn of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS: Economic Kitchens, Social assistance, Nutrition history, Galicia, Nineteenth century

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the nineteenth century, Spain developed a public system for providing assistance to those in need. The requirements for accessing these institutions delineated very specific social groups: the sick and the indigent. Increasingly, however, a new sector facing subsistence difficulties emerged during the century. Day labourers and low-skilled workers were often unable to support themselves. Working conditions in both urban and rural environments fostered the growth of a lower social class that, under certain circumstances (such as years of poor harvests or lack of employment), faced serious difficulties in sustaining itself, resulting in insufficient and low-quality nutrition.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE ECONOMIC KITCHENS

In an effort to alleviate this situation, various initiatives and institutions were created to distribute, albeit sporadically, certain common food items: flour, grain, seasonal fruit, vegetables, or cured pork fat. In

many cases these distributions responded to catastrophic events or were carried out on festive occasions. It was common to distribute food during periods of famine or severe weather, as well as on patronal feast days or events related to the Royal Household: name days, births of heirs, or anniversaries of accession to the throne. In all cases, these were occasional distributions with no regularity or continuity.

In 1885, the liberal politician Segismundo Moret imported from the Normandy region[1] the model of the social dining hall that we now know as *Cocinas Económicas* ("Economic Kitchens"). That same year, the first establishment opened in Madrid, and the format quickly spread throughout Spain. It consisted of a simple structure with two spaces: a kitchen and a dining room. From early morning until nightfall, it provided food rations to dockworkers at the purchase cost of the ingredients. The cost of preparation – limited to fuel and the labour of cooks and waiters – as well as the purchase of utensils, furnishings, and the maintenance of facilities was covered through subscriptions or subsidies. In addition to being able to eat at any time of day, the main room was heated, allowing users to remain inside during adverse weather conditions to warm themselves and regain strength. The general purpose was to offer prepared dishes at minimal prices so that the working class could access stable menus allowing at least one daily meal of guaranteed quality. The menu had to align with the customary diet of labourers.

Following the ideological criteria of the founder of the *Tienda-Asilo* of Le Havre and of the promoter of its diffusion in Spain, these social dining halls were sponsored by public entities such as municipalities or provincial councils, or by philanthropic societies (athenaeums, artisans' circles, and similar organizations)[2].

Galicia was not immune to this wave of foundations, and between the opening in Madrid and the year 1900, similar dining halls were created in nine cities: the seven capitals of the old Kingdom, plus Ferrol and Pontevedra. The first was in A Coruña (1886), re-founded in 1887 and still active. The next, in 1891, were those of Santiago and Ferrol, opened less than two months apart and also still in operation.

THE ECONOMIC KITCHEN OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA AND ITS DIETARY MODEL

The *Cocina Económica* of Santiago marked a turning point in the country, as it was created within a Catholic society founded specifically for that purpose and with the explicit support of the Archbishopric, which assumed its direction. Until then, foundations throughout Spain had emerged within already-existing societies, and the participation of the Church was minimal, if present at all.

Despite ideological differences and management models, the food offered was very similar in all such establishments[3].

The rationale behind this composition of dishes, practically identical throughout the country, lies in the initial idea of offering food consistent with users' eating habits.

TABLE 1. **Menus and prices from the first ration list of the Santiago Economic Kitchen.** Prepared from Gaceta de Galicia, 23 July 1891, p. 2

RATION	PRICE
Bread	5 cts.
Broth	5 cts.
Cocido or assorted stew	10 cts.
Cod wiht rice or potatoes	10 cts.
Meat wiht rice or potatoes	15 cts.

The period of creation and expansion of the *Cocinas Económicas* coincided with the nutritional transition from vegetable-based diets, predominant in the eighteenth century, to the protein-, calorie-, and animal-fat-rich diets of the mid-twentieth century. This change was due mainly to a general increase in average income (Popkin 1993, p. 153), as well as to cultural shifts regarding certain foods such as milk, which went from being undervalued to being considered a staple (Pujol-Andreu and Cussó, 2014, p. 136).

According to studies by Castro Pérez (2019) and

1 In 1884, the politician and entrepreneur Jules Siegfried established a social dining hall in the port of Le Havre (France), whose design Moret later introduced in Spain in an almost identical form.

2 Siegfried was a prominent anticlerical figure who, from his various positions of authority, sought to remove religious orders from the charitable institutions under his jurisdiction. Moret, also a liberal, was less combative, yet he likewise avoided involving the Church in the newly created organizations.

3 The Economic Kitchen of Santiago was the first to introduce the distribution of meals in three shifts (breakfast, lunch, and dinner). Until then, comparable institutions typically provided only the midday meal, and in some localities, the evening meal as well.

Posse Antelo (1992), the usual diet of Galician urban workers – and specifically those of Santiago – was based on potatoes, bread (cornbread or mixed), wine, and broth (vegetables, broad beans, and *unto* – pork fat –). Meat or fish consumption was occasional due to cost or difficulty of access. Eggs and milk, as noted, were undervalued and often sold. Breakfast consisted of a piece of cornbread and a shot of brandy for men. Women replaced this with corn porridge or leftover broth from previous days. Over the study period, the liquor shot shifted to the afternoon snack, replaced at breakfast by milk with or without ground cocoa shells. Mid-morning, workers paused to eat bread and wine, sometimes accompanied by bacon or onion. The midday meal again featured bread, wine, and broth (to which increasing amounts of salted meat and a greater variety of legumes, alternating beans and chickpeas, were added), with a second dish of potatoes and/or salted pork or sausage (mainly chorizo). Gradually, wine consumption shifted to the evening, with water becoming the standard drink at lunch. Dinner again consisted mainly of bread and broth, occasionally accompanied by seasonal fruit obtained locally. In urban areas, other foods such as cod, sardines, or omelettes were more commonly found.

The other segment of the lower class – the poor and indigent – could enter one of the city's public charitable institutions: the Poorhouse and the Home for the Elderly, both supported by the municipality. Their dietary regime was similar to that of the Economic Kitchen; that is, based on their usual diet as described. Purchase invoices confirm this, including regular wine consumption. It was only in the final years of the nineteenth century that dietary changes began to appear, including the introduction of milk, cocoa, and beef.

The other major charitable institution in the city, the Conjo Asylum, owned by the Archbishopric, had a dietary regime completely different from those described. There, meal preparation was supervised by medical authorities as part of the patients' treatment, with some diets individually tailored. The operation of a farm and garden[4] provided the hospital with a large supply of fresh foods, freeing budget allocations for less typical items such as fresh fish or meats from different sources.

[4] The asylum derived three major benefits from this project: the proper upkeep of the vast grounds of the former Mercedarian monastery, a steady supply of fresh products for its storerooms – thereby ensuring full traceability and quality from the source – and the use of these activities as occupational therapy for a significant number of its inmates.

In municipal charities, as well as in the Founding Society of the Economic Kitchen, the quality of the food served was ensured by the conditions established in procurement contracts. Supplies, in addition to having particular characteristics, were subjected to several quality inspections, with the stipulation that if any were not passed, the vendor had to remove the goods and provide replacements within three days, without applying any surcharge. Thus, ingredients were of optimal health quality, as it was in the supplier's best interest.

NUTRITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND SOCIAL IMPACT

All this suggests that the food model disseminated by the Economic Kitchens and aimed at the needy was rich in fats and carbohydrates and low in high-value proteins. Fresh fruit consumption was not common, suggesting a diet low in both water- and fat-soluble vitamins. Furthermore, the most commonly consumed vegetable among rural and working-class Galicians was *grelo* (turnip greens), which is high in water and low in proteins, fats, and carbohydrates, and has shown certain goitrogenic properties. Nevertheless, several strengths of the model should be noted: the replacement of wine by water in all services, the introduction of dairy in breakfast, the regular offering of beef and fish, the variety of legumes, and the daily preparation of food, which avoided repeated reheating and its consequent nutrient loss. But undoubtedly, the most appreciable improvement in the diet of the lower classes was the quality of the products offered, ensured through contract conditions and exhaustive sanitary inspections. Combined with the low selling price[5], this allowed the needy to eat in these social dining halls at lower cost and higher quality than they could achieve on their own. Evidence of this improvement lies in the excellent reception the Economic Kitchens enjoyed among their target audience, whose habitual diet was deficient. Except for particular cases of poor management or insufficient clientele, most of those created in the final years of the nineteenth century

[5] As noted above, the price of each meal was calculated solely on the basis of the cost of the raw ingredients. Expenses related to labour, fuel, building maintenance, kitchenware, furniture, and other operational needs were covered by the monthly subscriptions of the members. This was the arrangement in the early years, to which additional sources of extraordinary funding were later added: monetary and in-kind donations, subsidies, testamentary bequests, and income from property.

remain active or operated for several decades. Those founded under philanthropic principles expanded their facilities and services. For example, the A Coruña kitchen came to have three dining halls in different parts of the city, and the Ferrol kitchen expanded from one to two daily services. Those aligned with Christian charity expanded their services as well, such as the Santiago or Vigo kitchens, which soon added their own school.

CONCLUSIONS

The main contribution of these new forms of social assistance was, first, to provide a food resource to those in need and to workers who, not meeting the admission criteria, could not enter poorhouses or similar institutions. They served the needs of a large social sector that otherwise had to resort to begging. Secondarily, they contributed to the disappearance of the earlier model of food charity based on issuing poverty certificates. The Economic Kitchens opened their doors to anyone wishing to attend, without requiring proof of social status.

In the case of Santiago de Compostela, this benefit was, if anything, greater than in other cities, precisely because it was the first to be governed by Catholic principles and run by ecclesiastical personnel. Between the end of the century and the first quarter of the twentieth, it has been documented that meals prepared in the Economic Kitchen were also served at the Abbreviated School of First Letters and Small Industries, the Maternal Classes, and the Board for Abandoned Children, three educational institutions for poor children. Beneficiaries also included users of the Compostela Charity Association, inmates of the district jail, and indigent pilgrims arriving to venerate the apostolic relics. All these entities belonged to the Church or to institutions closely linked to it, forming an assistance network in which the Economic Kitchen acted as the connector. Finally, through a collaboration agreement, it also provided food to children attending public schools throughout the city through the School Canteen, organized by the University of Santiago.

The occupancy figures clearly demonstrate the success of this initiative. During the first years for which data are available, the Santiago dining hall served more than one hundred users per day on average, reaching peaks of more than 250,000 annual rations (1904). Considering that the city's population was around 25,000 inhabitants, and that the registered figures do not include services provided in associated institutions (schools, associations, prison, etc.), the significance of the Economic Kitchen in turn-of-the-century society is evident.

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