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Dana Simmons, *Vital Minimum: Need, Science and Politics in Modern France* (Chicago, Chicago University Press 2015), ISBN: 022625156X £31.50

Vital Minimum is an ambitious book. It sets out to explore the relationship between scientific studies of human need and the development of wage policies in modern France. It tells a story that runs from the 1830s to the 1950s and cuts across the intellectual worlds of chemists, agronomists, social scientists, workers and politicians – a story that begins with nineteenth-century studies of animal excrement and culminates with the creation of the SMIG.

Simmons' central contention is that the development of the modern wage economy and the welfare state in France were underpinned by a science of need. This is a broad claim, but the book does show how researchers from a number of fields engaged with the question of need and how such investigations contributed to debates and policies regarding wages. The early chapters introduce agronomists Jean-Baptiste Boussingault and Jean-Baptiste Dumas who moved from measuring the intake and excretions of farm animals to the analysis of human subsistence needs. Fellow agronomist Adrien de Gasparin applied a similar approach to wages: by measuring how many grams of wheat were required for a man to perform a standard quantity of manual labour, he sought to calculate the cost of the reproduction of labour. From chemical analyses of subsistence, Simmons moves to the rather different field of social surveys, mapping the contribution of figures such as Le Play, Gérando and their socialist critics at publications like *L'Atelier* in the 1840s, before addressing the history of rationing during the siege of Paris in 1870-71, and exploring debates about need and wages among sociologists and social reformers in the Third Republic. The last two chapters highlight how inheritors of some of these scientific and social-scientific traditions participated in policy debates under Vichy and the Fourth Republic. Simmons suggests that the socio-biological approach of the Leplaysians was the most influential at Vichy, notably through work of François Perroux and the French Foundation for the Study of Human Problems, though nutritional science and the tradition of labour movement statistics were also present. Having initially promised to guarantee a 'salaire minimum vital', the Vichy government backtracked and it was only with the minimum wage legislation of 1950 that this aspiration would be realised. Even then, as Simmons shows in her final chapter, discussions over what constituted the 'minimum vital' were fraught, as aspirations and expectations about living standards shifted in postwar France.

Simmons' narrative is built up from telling details, vignettes of particular individuals or historical sites where questions of need are at stake. This approach sometimes makes it difficult to keep in view the threads of the overall argument and leaves questions in the reader's mind about how one episode in the story links to another, how scientific conceptions of need change over time, why one approach triumphs over another, or how periods of rationing shape the development of social policy in the longer term. Although Simmons references the Foucauldian concept of bio-politics, this is not quite a genealogy of the *minimum vital*, as there is a tension between the focus on a discursive object and the telling of individual stories. Ultimately Simmons argues that 'real' need came to be defined in the mid-twentieth-century in terms of social rather than physiological or chemical realities, though as the conclusion of *Vital Minimum* acknowledges, environmental critiques of consumer capitalism have since invited us to think again about what we really need.

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