



Vital Minimum: Need, Science, and Politics in Modern France

By Dana Simmons



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What constitutes a need? Who gets to decide what people do or do not need? In modern France, scientists, both amateur and professional, were engaged in defining and measuring human needs. These scientists did not trust in a providential economy to distribute the fruits of labor and uphold the social order. Rather, they believed that social organization should be actively directed according to scientific principles. They grounded their study of human needs on quantifiable foundations: agricultural and physiological experiments, demographic studies, and statistics.

The result was the concept of the "vital minimum"--the living wage, a measure of physical and social needs. In this book, Dana Simmons traces the history of this concept, revealing the intersections between technologies of measurement, such as calorimeters and social surveys, and technologies of wages and welfare, such as minimum wages, poor aid, and welfare programs. In looking at how we define and measure need, *Vital Minimum* raises profound questions about the authority of nature and the nature of inequality.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Dana Simmons's marvelous and thoughtful new book takes on a question that many of us likely take for granted: 'What is a need; what is a want, a desire, a luxury? *Vital Minimum* offers an answer that emerges from and is embedded in the particular historical context of nineteenth century France, but has consequences that range well beyond modern French history. . . . Highly recommended!"

(Carla Nappi *New Books in Science, Technology, and Society*)

"This unique book does a wonderful job of blending history with many other disciplines. Tracing a fluid arc from natural law to socialist political theory in post-WW II France, the author elaborates on issues of physical, social, and political need. She engages readers in the lively and passionate debate, which has raged in France since 1789, on the nature of inequality, giving them a fascinating look at the distinct French view on the matter and demonstrating that the current political debate on inequality has long and complicated origins. Highly recommended."

(*Choice*)

"[E]minently readable, likely because it recalls to the reader that the first meaning of history is 'inquiry.' Here the inquiry is motivated and driven by the 'appeal of epochalist modes of social thought,' which makes us see our contemporary times as different...*Vital Minimum* constructs new and interesting problems. In doing so, it asks more questions than it is able to answer. That, however, is no small achievement."

(*American Historical Review*)

"How, one might wonder, did social questions about basic human subsistence and welfare become intertwined — even overwhelmed — by economic imperatives? Dana Simmons's *Vital Minimum: Need, Science, and Politics in Modern France* provides essential reading for anyone who has pondered this question. In this well-written and tightly-argued volume, Simmons examines how the concept of minimum needs emerged in a country often seen as the embodiment of the welfare state: France. Simmons's history brings together the agronomists, chemists, sociologists, anthropologists, and politicians who helped to create a 'technopolitics of human needs' during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."

(*Canadian Journal of History*)

"'Reason not the need,' admonishes King Lear. Yet for the past two hundred years scientists have done just that: they have deployed the tools of scientific inquiry to calculate the minimum needed to sustain life. What sort of life? As Dana Simmons shows in this remarkable book, a productive one—specifically, that of the male wage earner and his reproductive family unit. Chemists and agronomists have analyzed the feces and exhalations of laboring men and animals. Social scientists have assembled comparative scales of misery and family budgets. From Lavoisier's human machines and the Commune's ration cards to Vichy's eugenicist vital minimum and the postwar minimum wage, Simmons' lively and incisive history of 'need' transforms our understanding of the underpinnings of modern political economy, the welfare state, and modern science alike. Like Lear, Simmons warns us that to 'reason the need' is to value human life 'cheap as beasts.'"

(Ken Alder, *Northwestern University*)

"How did 'our daily bread' become the object of scientific experiment, philosophical debate, and mass

politics? By untangling the threads of the 'vital minimum,' this elegant and eye-opening book provides nothing less than a hidden genealogy of the modern state and biopolitical citizenship. With a fascinating, discipline-scrambling cast of characters—including boxed-in-prisoners, early recyclers, starving families, panting chemists, and earnest economists—Simmons deftly analyzes the material technologies and the natural, moral, and political economies which merged and clashed in the race to set the lower limit on life. A must-read for historians of nineteenth and twentieth-century science, economics, and politics."

(John Tresch, University of Pennsylvania)

"An impressive study, drawing upon a range of neglected or unknown evidence, *Vital Minimum* is the first book to bring the important historical themes of consumption, nutrition science, and statistics together in a single volume—themes which are particularly timely given the economic troubles of recent years. Focusing on France from 1790 to the 1970s, Simmons offers a detailed and rigorous examination of the circumstances under which debates about need arose and were addressed. This is an extremely readable and thought-provoking book."

(E. C. Spary, University of Cambridge)

About the Author

Dana Simmons is associate professor of history at the University of California, Riverside.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jennifer Oaks:

Have you spare time to get a day? What do you do when you have much more or little spare time? Yeah, you can choose the suitable activity to get spend your time. Any person spent their particular spare time to take a wander, shopping, or went to typically the Mall. How about open as well as read a book titled *Vital Minimum: Need, Science, and Politics in Modern France*? Maybe it is for being best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time with your favorite's book, you can better than before. Do you agree with the opinion or you have various other opinion?

Angela Caves:

As people who live in the particular modest era should be revise about what going on or information even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era which can be always change and move ahead. Some of you maybe will update themselves by studying books. It is a good choice for you but the problems coming to a person is you don't know which you should start with. This *Vital Minimum: Need, Science, and Politics in Modern France* is our recommendation so you keep up with the world. Why, because book serves what you want and wish in this era.

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