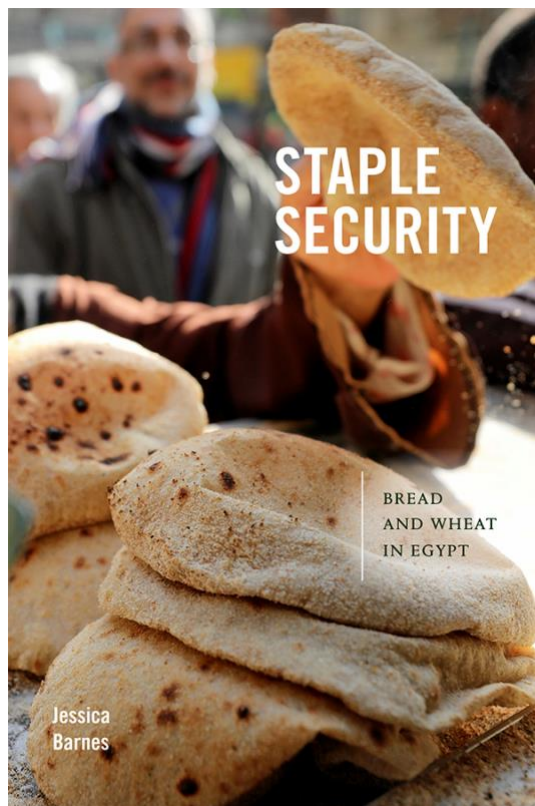


Teaching Suggestions for *Staple Security: Bread and Wheat in Egypt*
(Duke University Press, 2022)
<https://www.dukeupress.edu/staple-security>

by
Jessica Barnes

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This teaching guide is designed to offer suggestions for those teaching *Staple Security* in their classes. I would be happy to visit or zoom into the class of instructors who teach this book, schedule permitting, either to give a presentation or to talk about the book with students. If you are interested in this possibility, please contact me at jebarnes@mailbox.sc.edu.

Staple Security would work well as a text for both undergraduate and graduate level courses on a range of topics including anthropology, geography, food, environmental studies, agriculture, the Middle East, and qualitative research methods. In this guide, I begin by providing some suggestions of how to address the contemporary significance of this book in light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and its impact on world wheat markets. I then provide discussion questions, suggested activities, and additional resources for each chapter.

Contemporary Significance: The War in Ukraine

As the book goes to press and I write this teaching guide, the war between Russia and Ukraine – both of which are major producers of wheat – is ongoing. The five-month blockade on Ukrainian ports and disruption to Russian exports in the first half of 2022 had a profound impact on global grain markets. There has been a lot of press coverage of the impact of the conflict on grain supplies, particularly to the Middle East, where a number of countries are dependent on imports from the Black Sea region. While the situation is rapidly changing – in July 2022, the UN brokered a deal to allow Ukraine to export its wheat – the central arguments of this book about the connections between global wheat production, trade, and national and individual senses and practices of security, hold considerable topical resonance.

Resources

- The following article in *The Conversation* gives a simple explanation of the link between the war in Ukraine and grain supplies to the Middle East and could be a good entry into the topic for an introductory course: Barnes, J. 2022 In Egypt Where a Meal Isn't Complete Without Bread, War in Ukraine is Threatening the Wheat Supply and Access to this Staple Food. *The Conversation*, March 25. <https://theconversation.com/in-egypt-where-a-meal-isnt-complete-without-bread-war-in-ukraine-is-threatening-the-wheat-supply-and-access-to-this-staple-food-179361>
- For an update on how the Egyptian government initially responded to the war in Ukraine – namely through seeking to buy as much of the Egyptian wheat harvest as possible in spring 2022, and through encouraging farmers to plant more wheat (which speaks to my argument in chapter 2), see the following report from the US Foreign Agricultural Service: Wally, A. and O. Akingbe, 2022 Import Challenges and High Prices Reduces Egypt's Wheat and Corn Imports. Egypt Grain and Feed Annual. *USDA FAS Report*, March 28. <https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/egypt-grain-and-feed-annual-6>.
- The following interactive article offers several helpful maps to explain the ramifications of the Russian blockade of grain exports: Ahmed, K. et al, 2022 The Black Sea Blockade: Mapping the Impact of the War in Ukraine on the World's Food Supply – Interactive. *The Guardian*, June 9. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/ng-interactive/2022/jun/09/the-black-sea-blockade-mapping-the-impact-of-war-in-ukraine-on-the-worlds-food-supply-interactive>.

Activity

1. Give students a recent news article and ask them to reflect on the parallels they see with the book. What aspects of staple security do they see, in terms of either national-level security concerns or individual lived experience? How does the book go beyond these journalistic accounts?

The following two examples contain a number of clear points of connection:

Yee, V. and A. Alami, 2022 In North Africa, Ukraine War Strains Economies Weakened by the Pandemic, *The New York Times*, February 25.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/world/middleeast/in-north-africa-ukraine-war-strains-economies-weakened-by-pandemic.html>

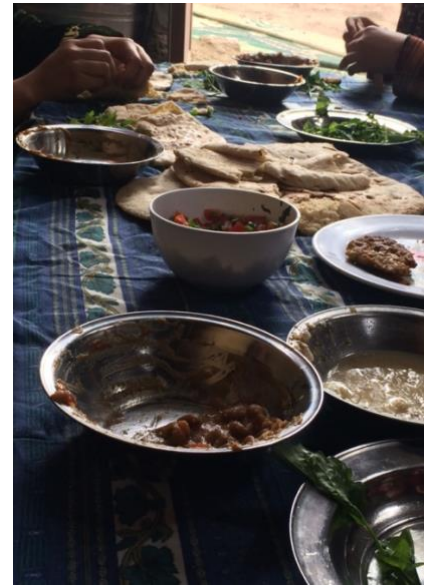
- The reference to Ms. Mohamed, a woman who has little interest in the news, but has been worrying about the potential impact of the Ukraine war on Egypt's wheat supply, is illustrative of how wheat and bread supplies are something that Egyptians fret about in their daily lives (i.e. staple security on the individual level).
- The article also refers to the work the government has been doing to try and find alternative grain suppliers in the wake of the Russian invasion (i.e. staple security on the national level).

Cordall, S. and L. Davies, 2022 “We Need Bread:” Fears in Middle East as Ukraine War Hits Wheat Imports. *The Guardian*, March 7. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/07/we-need-bread-fears-in-middle-east-as-ukraine-russia-war-hits-wheat-imports>

- This article underscores the importance of bread as a staple across a number of countries of the Middle East. It also contains a number of striking parallels with themes covered in the book, such as:
 - Tunisians talking about the importance of bread on a daily basis, particularly as other costs go up, and the Tunisian government being unwilling to admit any flour shortages.
 - The Lebanese economy and trade minister admitting that the country only had enough wheat for a month or a month or a half.
 - The concluding statement from the 80 year old Tunisian saying that the country should invest in our domestic production, so as not to be so reliant on imports (compared to the quote from Leila on p.121).

Introduction

The introduction lays out the book's argument and introduces wheat farming in Egypt, the process of wheat importation, and the different kinds of bread consumed by Egyptians. The chapter defines two key terms – “staple food” and “security” – and explains the value of bringing these words together through the concept of staple security. It outlines how staple security departs from food security by focusing attention on staple foods and bringing security – as an affectively-charged state of being and a form of action – to the fore. The chapter ends with a description of the author's methodology for following Egypt's wheat and bread. This includes a discussion of the challenges of conducting overseas fieldwork as a parent of young children and the value of collaboration with a research assistant as a way to address the structural constraints that researchers may face at particular life stages, limiting access to their field sites.



Questions

- The introduction begins with an image titled “Eating bread, eating with bread.” What do you notice about the layout of the table in this image and the style of eating? What do you think the author is trying to do by beginning the book with this image? This is one of a set of full-page photos integrated through the book between each chapter. What story do these images, and their captions, tell?
- The author writes that security is a “state of being” and a “form of action” (p.22). What does she mean by this? What does this mean to you? Is security something that you feel, or something that you do, or both?
- How does the author's concept of “staple security” depart from the commonly discussed “food security”? How useful do you find this concept?
- Is there a staple food in the United States? In debating this question, Beoko-Betts's article on (referenced in note 29, p.242) could be brought into the discussion to prompt reflection on whether the answer to this question might differ depending on who you ask. Given the article's date of publication, this could also raise the question of whether and how staples change through time. Beoku-Betts, Josephine. 1995. “We Got Our Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity among the Gullah.” *Gender and Society* 9, no. 5: 535–55.
- What methods did the author use to gather the material for this book? How does this methodological approach allow the author to access different scales of analysis? What do you see as being the strengths and weaknesses of these methods?

Activities

1. Brainstorm on the board or create a word cloud of what the word “staple” means.

Share some images of where students might see this word in their day-to-day lives as a way of generating reflections of the associations it carries, such as the following:



The restaurant chain Chipotle's humorous video clip on rice as a staple could also be used as a prompt for discussion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v25zvJ8su8M>.

2. Give students a set of extracts from classic texts that refer to staple foods in different places. Ask them to work in pairs to identify across this range of examples the characteristics that make something a staple food. They may write a list or draw a spider diagram of these characteristics. Use this as a way to talk through the author's definition of staples on pages 14-19. The following extracts work well:
 - Weismantel, M. 1988 *Food, Gender, and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes*, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 91 (on potatoes and barley)
 - Ohnuki-Tierney, E. 1993 *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*, Princeton University Press, p.13, p.30, p.40 (on rice)
 - Phillips, Kristin D. 2018 *An Ethnography of Hunger: Politics, Subsistence, and the Unpredictable Grace of the Sun*, Indiana University Press, p.85 (on ugali)
 - Evans-Pritchard, E. 1940 *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, Oxford University Press, p.21 (on milk)
 - Kaplan, S. 2006 *Good Bread is Back: A Contemporary History of French Bread, the Way It Is Made, and the People Who Make It*, Duke University Press, p.6 (on bread)
 - Wynne, L. 2015 "I Hate it": Tortilla-Making, Class and Women's Tastes in Rural Yucatán, Mexico. *Food and Foodways*, 18(3): 379-397, p.384 (on tortillas)
 - Weiss, B. 1996 *The Making and Unmaking of the Haya Lived World: Consumption, Commoditization, and Everyday Practice*, Duke University Press, p.72, p.82 (on bananas)
3. Bread is central to Egyptian national identity. What foods are central to students' identities? In class, read *Where I'm From* by George Ella Lyon <http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>. After talking through how food features in this poem of identity, ask students to take 10-15 minutes to jot down ideas in response to the prompt, "Where are you from?" Students can focus on food, or as Lyon does, combine food and other things. Give students a further 10 minutes to combine these responses into poems and 10 minutes to share in small groups. Do any staple foods feature in students' stories of where they are from? Pair this activity with a discussion of Kothari, G. 1999 If You Are What You Eat Then What Am I? *Kenyon Review*, 11(1). <https://kenyonreview.org/journal/winter-1999/selections/geeta-kothari-656342/>
4. Use the following essay prompt: What is your staple food and why? In answering question, students might reflect on their eating patterns, the kinds of meals they eat, the foods that feature regularly, and how they think about the different foods that they eat.

5. Ask students to select another ethnography and compare its methods section to the methods section in this book (p.32-37). What are the similarities and differences between how these two authors talk about their identities and methodological approaches? How does this shape how readers approach the rest of the text?

For further suggestions of activities that would pair well with a discussion of the methods in this book, such as the “implosion exercise” designed to get researchers to reflect on the personal histories they bring to a research project, see Günel and Watanabe’s patchwork ethnography syllabus: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/patchwork-ethnography-syllabus>.

Resources

- On methods, see Günel, Gökçe, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe. 2020. “A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography.” Member Voices, *Fieldsights*, June 9. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>.
- I am currently working with Mariam Taher, my research assistant, on an article that will offer a more in-depth account and analysis of our collaborative approach. If anyone would like to see a draft of this article, “Walking with Bread in Egypt: Ethnographic Collaboration Between a Researcher and Research Assistant,” I would be happy to share it.

Chapter 1: Staple Becoming

This chapter tells the story of the becoming of wheat and bread in Egypt over the course of the twentieth century through today. It traces the history of wheat varietal development and the advances of the Green Revolution in Egypt. It shows how the production of a high-yielding, disease-resistant wheat has been tied to concerns about the threat of a rust epidemic and the nation running out of bread. It then probes the work of seed production, dissemination, and fertilizer-heavy cultivation required to translate those seeds' promise into reality. The second part of the chapter focuses on the history of Egypt's bread subsidy. It examines how successive governments have tweaked the price, size, composition, and style of subsidized bread over time in an effort to maintain an unfailing supply of acceptable bread and avert the possibility of a bread riot.



Questions

- The author begins this chapter with a discussion of paintings from Pharaonic tombs. Why do you think she does this?
- What does the author mean by the “becoming” of wheat and bread (p.43)?
- In this chapter, the author pairs two histories of seeds and bread. What do you learn from reading these narratives side by side?
- Why was there some resistance among Egyptian farmers about the new high-yielding varieties of wheat? What does this say about the government's project of trying to produce more wheat?
- The Egyptian government sees bread as a matter of national security. What evidence is there for this in the history of Egypt's bread subsidy program?

Activities

1. Use the website of the Borlaug Global Rust Initiative (referenced on p.59) – an international coalition of wheat breeders dedicated to developing new, more resilient crop varieties (<https://bgri.cornell.edu>) – as the basis of an in-class discussion activity. What rhetoric is used to justify the BGRI's work? What key terms does the organization use to describe the problem it seeks to address? To what extent does this initiative frame its work in terms of threats and security?
2. The author examines the national significance of wheat in Egypt (p.45-46). Are there examples of nationalist imagery associated with wheat in other countries? Ask students to select another major wheat producing and bread eating country, such as the United States, France, Australia, or Russia, and explore the degree to which this crop is infused with nationalist imagery. The following article offers an interesting comparison point for the US case: Twelbeck, K. 2020 Wheat: A Powerful Crop in US-American Culture. *Between Politics and Plant Agency*. *GAIA*, 29(4): 235-242. <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.29.4.8>.

3. Ask students to write a case study of another country's staple food subsidy, comparing this subsidy program with Egypt's bread subsidy. What are the similarities and differences? What transitions has this subsidy been through over the course of its history? Do these food subsidies still exist? Why or why not? Are these subsidies for foods you would consider staples?

The following report has a number of good examples that students might select from: Alderman, Harold; Gentilini, Ugo; Yemtsov, Ruslan. 2018. *The 1.5 Billion People Question: Food, Vouchers, or Cash Transfers?* Washington, DC: World Bank.
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/27907>.

4. For a class project, have students pick a wheat variety and make a Google Earth Project tracing its origins, development, and dissemination. Students might, for example, focus on Norin 10 and trace its passage from the US to Japan, back to the US, to Mexico, and then to Egypt. See note 26, p.248; Reitz, L. and S. Salmon. 1968. "Origin, History, and Use of Norin 10 Wheat." *Crop Science* 8, no. 6: 668–89; and Perkins, J. 1997 *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes and the Cold War*, Oxford University Press.

For information on making a Google Earth Project, see:

- this helpful tutorial – <https://www.google.com/earth/outreach/learn/create-a-map-or-story-in-google-earth-web/#to-share-a-link-to-the-project-5-1>
- this online guide and introductory Intro to Creation Tools video tutorial – <https://support.google.com/earth/answer/9398104>

Resources

- For some useful short articles and visuals on the history of subsidized bread in Egypt, see Mada Masr, 2021 Bread Politics. December 22, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2021/12/22/feature/politics/bread-politics/>.

Chapter 2: Gold of the Land

This chapter follows wheat seeds from their implantation in Egyptian fields to their harvest. It explores what staple security means to small-scale farmers who cultivate wheat and the relationship between them and the government that claims a national stake in this homegrown staple. It begins by contrasting newspaper coverage of the seasonal cycle of planting and harvesting wheat with how rural households see this cycle. It then turns to government procurement as the mechanism through which the state moves wheat out of the domain of household bread production and into the domain of national subsidized bread production. It examines the procurement price as a device that the government employs to incentivize farmers to grow wheat and sell their harvest. It explores the disconnect between this vision and the reality of small-scale farmers, who grow wheat primarily as a crop for household consumption rather than for the market.



Questions

- The author uses Egyptian newspapers as one of her sources in this chapter. What can we learn from headlines in national newspapers? What are the limits of such sources?
- In the Egyptian context where the government is (in theory) the sole procurer of domestically-grown wheat, the government assumes that the higher the price it offers to pay farmers for their harvest, the more wheat they are likely to grow and sell. How does the data presented in this chapter challenge that assumption?
- This chapter contrasts the views from Cairo and from a village. What insights do you get from this juxtaposition?
- What does the contrast between wheat and onions demonstrate?
- In March 2022, in light of the threat posed to Egypt's primary sources of imported wheat by the war in Ukraine and the need to procure enough wheat for the subsidized bread program, the government issued a decree requiring all wheat producers to sell a minimum of 12 ardab/feddan of wheat to the government (see <https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/egypt-grain-and-feed-annual-6>). (12 ardab/feddan is equivalent to 4.28 tons/ha, which can be compared to the average wheat yields of 6.8 tons/ha for the country as a whole or 5 tons/ha in more marginal areas, see p.84.) From what you have learned in this chapter, how do you think such a policy would have been received by small farmers like Marwa and Khaled?

Activities

1. The photographs of wheat cultivation in Egypt in this chapter could be used as the basis for an in-class discussion activity. Compare them to images of wheat cultivation in the United States. (See, for example, the images and farm profiles on <https://ourstory.uswheat.org>.) Discuss the contrast between these production systems. What do these different scales of production mean for questions of food security?

2. Use the data on domestic wheat production in Egypt on the FAOSTAT database as the foundation of an assignment (<https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home>). Search under Production>Crops and livestock>Countries/Egypt>Crops/wheat>Dates/Select all. Ask students to select a variable to examine from area harvested, yield, or production quantity, download the data in Excel, and plot a graph. Drawing on the information in this chapter (and in chapter 1), can they explain the temporal trends in the data?

Resources

- The following article contains a useful short video clip describing the situation for Egyptian farmers in 2022, when the government asked farmers to supply at least 60% of their crop to the government at a price significantly lower than the world market price: El-Safty, S. 2022 Cut Off from Black Sea Wheat Imports, Egypt Leans on Local Harvest, *Reuters*, May 27. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/cut-off-black-sea-wheat-imports-egypt-leans-local-harvest-2022-05-27/>.
- For an update on the situation for Egyptian farmers in spring 2022 and the Egyptian government's response to the war in Ukraine, see Wally, A. and O. Akingbe, 2022 Import Challenges and High Prices Reduces Egypt's Wheat and Corn Imports. Egypt Grain and Feed Annual. *USDA FAS Report*, March 28. <https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/egypt-grain-and-feed-annual-6>.

Chapter 3: Grain On the Move

This chapter examines procuring foreign wheat, assessing wheat quality, and storing wheat as practices of staple security. It looks, first, at the dynamics of the global grain trade and the government's procurement of imported wheat for the subsidized bread program. It explores the factors that shape the government's ability to secure wheat from global markets and the popular and political anxieties surrounding whether Egypt will be able to access sufficient wheat for its population's bread needs. Second, it examines quality concerns regarding imported wheat, using the case of a recent controversy over the ergot fungus to explore related questions of quality, trust, and security. Third, it looks at grain storage in silos, open warehouses, and farmers' homes. It discusses the political salience of storage and the government's efforts to expand and upgrade the storage infrastructure. It also looks at how storage can pose a threat as a locus of corruption.



Questions

- In this chapter, Egypt's wheat appears in several different places – in the hold of a cargo ship, on a trader's Twitter feed, in a silo, on a posting on Craigslist, and piled in a farmer's living room. How are these contexts different? Is this the same kind of wheat? How does considering the contrasting spaces wheat passes through shape how we think about wheat as an object of study?
- Why do Egyptians worry about their reliance on imported wheat? Do you ever worry about where your food comes from? Does it bother you if foods are imported? For students in the United States, it would be interesting to probe their awareness of the fact that the US has one of the highest levels of food self-sufficiency in the world. While the US does import a considerable amount of food, it is not reliant on other countries for key cereal crops. How has this influenced students' experience of security (compared, for instance, to Leila's, on p.121)?
- What did the controversy over ergot in imported grain say about different understandings of risk and scientific expertise?
- What does the author mean when she writes about Egyptian grain inspectors deploying the ergot tolerance level as a "security device" (p.131)?
- The author argues that storing grain produces a particular kind of affective state of being. What are some examples that illustrate this?

Activities

1. Create a homework assignment around this data visualization of global shipping: <https://www.shipmap.org>. Ask students to use the filters in the top right-hand corner of the map to explore the data for "dry bulk" ships, which are the kind of cargo ship that carries grain. They can zoom into Egypt and trace the passage of ships from the Black Sea to Egypt. How this data visualization present a different way of seeing the world?

2. Ask students to explore data on Egypt's wheat imports in the FAOSTAT database. What trend do they see? Drawing on information presented in this chapter, what might be some factors that explain the fluctuations evident in the data? How does the pattern change when they look at import value rather than import quantity?
 - Use data from <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home>.
 - Download data on wheat production. Search under Trade>Crops and livestock>Countries/Egypt>Import Quantity (or Import Value)>Crops and livestock/Wheat>Dates/all years.
3. This chapter forefronts the significance of grain silos. Silos are an important part of the landscape in the United States also. For a creative project, students might create a collage of imagery of silos from different sources, such as landscape painting, photography, or advertising materials, and write a reflection on how silos feature in our landscape.

In some cases, silos are a site of artistic projects. Images of this “silo art” could generate some interesting in-class discussion. See, for example, the following articles:

 - <https://www.cityartmankato.com/tours/silo-art/>
 - <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/gallery/2021/jul/20/australias-silo-murals-make-a-road-trip-an-art-odyssey-in-pictures>
4. This chapter could be taught alongside Chapter 6, “Mobility, Friction, and Fungibility” of Head, L, J. Atchison and A. Gates’ (2012) book *Ingrained: A Human Bio-Geography of Wheat*. Farnham: Ashgate. What parallels do students see between the Egyptian and Australian cases? What are points of contrast?

Resources

- There are some great time-lapse videos taken from the decks of cargo vessels, which offer a fascinating insight into global maritime trade. See, for example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D77T5x_Wp5c.
- For insights into the movement of other food commodities around the world, which could provide an interesting point of comparison to the wheat case discussed in this chapter, see:
 - The Banana Story by Johanna Seeleemann - <https://johannaseeleemann.com/Banana-Story>
 - Cook, Ian et al. 2004. Follow the Thing: Papaya. *Antipode*, 36(4): 642-664.
- A notable parallel with the discussion in this chapter of wheat quality and the role of port inspectors is Sarah Besky’s work on the assessment of tea quality and role of tea inspectors. See Besky, S. 2020 Chapter 1: The Work of Taste. In *Tasting Qualities: The Past and Future of Tea*, University of California Press, pp 21-48. These two chapters could work well taught together.
- An interesting contrast could be drawn between silos and other forms of storage that mediate the passage of food around the world. For some fascinating photographs of refrigerated storage, see Twilley, Nicola 2012 The Coldscape: From the Tank Farm to the Sushi Coffin. *Cabinet Magazine*, Issue 47. <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/47/twilley.php>.
- Two recent books offer complementary insights into the position of the United States and Russia in the global grain trade: Nelson, S. 2022 *Oceans of Grain: How American Wheat Remade the World*, Basic Books; Wengle, S. 2021 *Black Earth, White Bread: A Technopolitical History of Russian Agriculture and Food*, University of Wisconsin Press.

Chapter 4: Subsidized Bread

This chapter looks at government-subsidized baladi bread, the availability and quality of which is central not only to those who depend on it for daily sustenance but to the stability of the nation. Although governmental reforms in 2014 addressed shortages at bakeries and long lines, access to bread is now mediated by an electronic ration card. The chapter traces the complex process of getting this “smart card” and keeping it working, which determines whether or not people can buy baladi bread at the subsidized price. The reforms also encouraged competition between bakeries to incentivize the production of good quality bread. The chapter shows how the taste and texture of the loaves Egyptians end up eating rests, however, not only on government specifications and bakeries’ production practices, but on the careful ways in which people handle their loaves at the bakery and on the street.



Questions

- Why do lines at bakeries hold such political significance in Egypt?
- The author argues that “the smart card has become the new security device” (p.164). What does she mean by this? How is this reflected in the story of Fayza? How are the lines Fayza stands in different from bread lines?
- How do Fayza’s encounters with the state bureaucracy challenge politicians’ claims of affordable bread being a right for all Egyptians? What emotions does Fayza’s story generate for you and why?
- What makes good baladi bread? What role do state officials, bakery owners, and consumers play in shaping this quality?

Activities

1. Assign students the following two readings to read with this chapter:
 - Dickinson, M. 2020 Chapter 3: The Carrot and the Stick. In *Feeding the Crisis: Care and Abandonment in America’s Food Safety Net*, University of California Press, pp 40-70.
 - Garth, H. 2020 Chapter 1: La Lucha. In *Food in Cuba: The Pursuit of a Decent Meal*, University of California Press, pp 29-60.How do the experiences of the individuals documented in these chapters compare?
2. For an in-class discussion activity, compare this case of government bread with the case of “government cheese” in the United States. Through the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program, introduced by the Reagan administration, government cheese was provided to welfare, food stamp, and Social Security recipients at no cost (as a way to use up surplus milk produced by subsidies to the US dairy industry). Although this program was stopped in the 1990s, processed “American cheese” is still included as one of the “nutritious USDA Foods” in the the Commodity Supplemental Food Program provided to eligible Seniors (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/csfp/csfp-fact-sheet>).

Read this short piece of writing and use it as a starting point for a group conversation: Dempsey, B. 2018 The Tyranny and the Comfort of Government Cheese. *Taste*, August 21. <https://tastecooking.com/tyranny-comfort-government-cheese/>. Some questions to foster discussion: What are the different perceptions surrounding the quality of government cheese? Are the associations with the government positive or negative? How does the sense of stigma from having government cheese in your fridge compare to the case of Egypt, where subsidized bread is eaten by the majority of the population? What does this author mean by the “tyranny” and “comfort” of government cheese? What might be the dietary ramifications of distributing a high fat, high sodium food?

For a 20-minute NPR Planet Money report on the US government’s cheese subsidy, *Big Government Cheese*, see <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/21/999144678/big-government-cheese-classic>.

3. Activity 3 from chapter 1, in which students pick another food subsidy program to research, would also work well in conjunction with this chapter.

Resources

- For an interesting film on bread in Egyptian Cinema, see: <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2021/12/22/feature/culture/avant-titre-our-bread-our-dignity-bread-in-egyptian-cinema/>
- The short film, *Bike for Bread*, offers a fascinating insight into the transportation of bread around Cairo by bicycle: <https://vimeo.com/67435834>. While the bread featured in this film is most likely siyahi bread (judging from where it is being taken to be sold) rather than subsidized bread, the film offers a vivid portrait of the production and circulation of bread through Cairo.
- The art installation, *Bread*, by Egyptian artist, Youssef Limoud, could provoke some interesting discussion: <https://yousseflimoud.com/bread/>.

Chapter 5: Homemade Bread

This chapter looks at Egypt's various homemade breads, and at how those who prefer to eat these breads go about getting them. Drawing on fieldwork in Fayoum, the chapter examines, first, the value that rural households attach to homemade bread and the practices they employ to ensure they have it in their homes: baking together to share labor, finding the necessary ingredients, and carefully preserving loaves. Second, it looks at how Cairo residents who like the taste of homemade breads identify street-side vendors in the informal economy through local knowledge networks, make arrangements with home bakers, and bring bread from rural areas. Finally, the chapter looks at a perceived decline in home baking and the multiplicity of bread types as matters of national concern, and at the efforts of Cairo elites to sustain Egypt's homemade breads as objects of cultural heritage by recording them in exhibits, encyclopedias, and databases.



Questions

- The practices documented in this chapter aren't driven by a fear that people won't have any bread to eat but, rather, by a desire for a particular kind of bread. What does this reveal about the concept of staple security?
- The author writes that "the taste of a staple encompasses not just flavor and nutritional composition but the social relations of its production" (p.201). What does she mean by this?
- Practices of handling bread in the home would not typically be considered practices of "security" yet the author argues that they are. Do you find this argument convincing?
- How do the ways in which people access homemade bread in Cairo compare with your experience buying bread?
- It is difficult to know the prevalence of homemade bread production in Egypt. Why is this?

Activities

1. Ask students to make their own loaf of bread – soda bread for beginners, yeast-based bread for those with more experience – and bring them into class. Compare the taste of these homemade breads. What makes a good taste? Are there things, beyond flavor, that lead us to value some breads over others?
2. Organize a bread tasting activity to prompt students to think more about questions of taste and preference. This activity works well paired with Chapter 2: The Invention of Sliced Bread from Aaron Bobrow-Strain's (2012) book, *White Bread: A Social History of the Store Bought Loaf*, Beacon Press.

Buy a selection of loaves. (I like to use a Pepperidge Farm brown bread, Wonderbread, Captain John Dersts, grocery store bakery sourdough, Dave's Killer Bread sliced seeded, grocery store French bread, and gluten free bread.) Divide students into pairs and give them

each a loaf to focus on for ~5 minutes, before passing the bread on to the next group. Provide a handout with the following table on which students log their observations.

BRAND	PACKAGING How is the bread packaged and why? What images or text are used on the packaging?	BREAD TYPE What kind of bread is this? What do you notice about the bread's appearance (color, crust/crumb, shape)?	ADVERTISING How is the bread described? What is this description designed to convey?	CONTENTS What is in this bread? Do you know what these ingredients mean?	MARKET Who do you think the company is trying to market this bread to?	TASTE How does the bread smell, feel, and taste?
Bread 1						
Bread 2						

After students have discussed all the breads, segue into a broader discussion –

- Which of these breads are artisanal and why?
- Why of these breads are industrial and why?
- Which of these is the freshest?
- Which of these is the healthiest?
- To what degree are these breads marketed based on origin?
- Which of these breads draws on national imagery?
- Which of these breads is closest to its point of production?
- Which of these breads is safest to eat?
- What are the class associations of these breads?

3. Create an assignment around the various kinds of bread included in the Ark of Taste - <https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/en/ark-of-taste-slow-food/>. What different kinds of threat are these staples under? What rationales are given for their preservation?

Resources

- Speaking to the longevity of bread production in Egypt, there have been recent efforts to make bread from wheat found in Ancient Egyptian tombs. See Fortin, J. 2019 Ancient Egyptian Yeast Is This Bread's Secret Ingredient. *The New York Times*, Aug 8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/08/science/egyptian-yeast-bread.html>. This baking experiment also became prominent on Twitter - <https://twitter.com/SeamusBlackley/status/1158264819503419392>
- For a complementary article on household food provisioning in Cairo, see Fikry, N. 2022. Today's Children, Tomorrow's Meals: Rooftops as Spaces of Nurturance in Contemporary Egypt, *Gastronomica*, Summer: 81-91.

Conclusion

The conclusion brings together the strands of the book and reflects on the significance of this work. It highlights the parallels between this case and other staple foods around the world, showing how staple security can further understandings of food politics. It also examines what this analysis of food and security says about the nexus of other environmental resources and security. It draws a contrast with work on water security and energy security, calling for a more dynamic approach to resource security as a mode of practice rather than as an achieved status, and for adding nuance to how the resource itself is conceived. The book closes with a quotidian scene of a family eating a meal with bread, a moment that captures the social, material, and political relations that are produced through the presence and taste of this staple food.



Questions

- This chapter begins with an image titled “A staple meal,” which is the last in a series of full-page photos integrated through the book between each chapter. Together, these images tell the story of bread. Does this image mark the end or the beginning of the story?
- Now you have finished reading the book, what do you think of the concept of staple security? How would you define this concept in your own words?
- The author writes that “Security has a taste and texture” (p.233). What does she mean by this? Do you agree?
- Staple security is a multi-scaled concept. What are the advantages of thinking about states and practices of security on multiple scales? Does this approach pose any challenges?
- The author ends with a scene of a family eating lunch. Why do you think she chooses to end the book in this way? How does the last line of the book contrast with the first line of the introduction and in what ways does this capture the author’s central argument?

Activities

1. The conclusion gives a number of examples of staples in other parts of the world that have parallels with the case of bread and wheat in Egypt. For a class project, students could select a staple in another country and research its production, trade, and consumption. Do they see elements of staple security? Why or why not?

For inspiration, the following report contains some helpful examples of staple foods in several African countries as well as an interesting analysis of how they were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions: Yade, Mbaye, et al. 2021. The Impact of COVID-19 on Staple Food Prices: Location Matters. In 2021 *Annual Trends and Outlook Report: Building Resilient African Food Systems After COVID-19*, eds. John M. Ulimwengu, Mark A. Constas, and Éliane Ubalijoro, pp 25-45. Washington, DC: IFPRI.

<https://ebrary.ifpri.org/digital/collection/p15738coll2/id/134746>

2. For an essay assignment, students could choose another key resource and analyze it through the lens of staple security. What kinds of affective valence does this resource hold? What are the perceived threats that surround it and how are they rooted in historical experience? What practices are people on different scales – within a government, city, or household – adopting to try and mitigate those threats?

Resources

- The case of bread in Syria could offer an interesting comparative case for discussion. See this recent report from Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/21/syria-bread-crisis-exposes-government-failure>. See also, Martínez, José. 2020. “Topological Twists in the Syrian Conflict: Re-thinking Space through Bread.” *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 1: 121–36 and Martínez, José, and Brent Eng. 2017. “Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War.” *International Journal of Political Sociology* 11: 130–47.

I plan to update this guide intermittently. If you have any additional teaching suggestions, I would love to hear them. I thank Mike Mewborne and David Kneas for their helpful comments on a draft of this guide.

Jessica Barnes
jebarnes@mailbox.sc.edu
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