

/JESSICA BARNES, 2022, *Staple Security: Bread and Wheat in Egypt*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 296pp., ISBN 978-1-4780-1852-0

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Researchers familiar with studies of food and society likely have encountered many previous discussions of staple foods, whether rice in Japan, tortillas in Mexico, or fufu in Ghana. Yet few will have stopped to consider what makes a food a staple or the processes that sustain the centrality of staple foods to diets and cultures: dietary staples are often taken to be self-evident. Those same researchers undoubtedly will have met countless mentions of food security, a concept whose more overtly political uses have scrambled its meaning as well as its critical analytical possibilities. In *Staple Security*, Jessica Barnes examines bread as a staple in twentieth- and twenty-first Egypt, taking neither food staple nor food security for granted as concepts. Grounding her lucid analysis in an impressive range of published sources, archival records, and extensive ethnographic research, Barnes reveals the affective dimensions – that is, the felt experiences of security or insecurity – that studies of food access nearly always neglect. She connects the emotions provoked by fear of losing access to a quality staple to the actions and activities that individuals and institutions undertake to ensure a steady supply. The resulting rich, nuanced study of bread as a staple in Egypt, important and fascinating in its own right, has implications for all studies of food and security, regardless of time or place.

If staples are, as Barnes defines them, “foods that are defining features of meals, that accompany other foods, and that hold symbolic resonance” (19), then there is hardly a better example of a staple than bread in Egypt. Most Egyptians eat wheat bread with every meal, and the government subsidies that ensure the availability of inexpensive loaves are among the country’s most important and expensive state policies. In Egyptian colloquial Arabic, bread is *‘aish* or life.

To understand how Egyptians secure access to a food that defines not only eating well but living well, Barnes unpacks the travels of wheat and bread across Egypt. She follows wheat seeds from experiment stations to farm fields (chapter 1), harvested grain from farmers’ fields to state or household supplies (chapter 2), and imported grain from ports to silos (chapter 3). She tracks state-subsidized baladi loaves from urban commercial bakeries to plastic carrier bags to

kitchens (chapter 4, co-written with her research assistant Mariam Taher) and homemade loaves from rural home ovens to tables, freezers, or cardboard storage boxes (chapter 5). Barnes leaves few moments in bread's becoming in Egypt unexamined, and the rewards to paying such close attention across diverse spaces and experiences are many.

Chief among the book's contributions is its demonstration of security – here, security in a food staple, but potentially applicable to resource security more generally – as a never-ending process rather than a state of being that can be definitively achieved. Barnes characterizes staple security as “a set of practices through which states, households, and individuals seek to secure the continuous supply of a palatable staple so as to address anxieties about staple absence and meet desires for staple quality” (30). In the case of bread in Egypt, those practices include everything from plant breeders developing and promoting disease-resistant varieties to government institutions setting the price for domestic and foreign grain purchases. They encompass bakery customers navigating the technologies required to access state-subsidized bread as well as home bakers carefully storing loaves so that the supply of good bread extends to the next firing of their oven.

Barnes's attention to different sites and scales of security produces insights that studies focused solely on the state, the household, or the individual would miss. Although both the government and individual Egyptians take daily actions to ensure the continuous availability of good bread, these actions do not always align. The government wants Egyptian farmers to grow wheat and sell it to the state to facilitate the production of affordable baladi bread for poor urban consumers; meanwhile, smallholder farmers often see wheat cultivation as a means of securing household wheat supplies and base their farming decisions on family needs. Bakery owners who reduce the size of subsidized loaves to maintain or increase their individual profits risk damage to the government's reputation for providing its citizens with bread of a standard size and quality. State officials charged with overseeing purchases of imported grain may see personal gain from laxer quality standards, yet the state considers adherence to strict standards vital to the health of Egyptian wheat and people. In these examples and others, the tensions and contradictions that arise among diverse actors as they struggle to meet a seemingly common goal come sharply into view, underscoring the argument that staple security is anything but straightforward to achieve.

The analytical acumen of *Staple Security* is complemented by its methodological flexibility and creativity. Barnes confidently navigates multiple research methods: historical

reconstruction based on archival manuscripts, aggregation and analysis of the content of newspaper accounts over many decades, interviews with government employees and other professionals, and extended ethnographic encounters in homes and bakeries. She is also refreshingly open about the challenges of conducting this research as a parent with a full-time job and comparatively limited possibilities for extended fieldwork. Barnes models a strategy for navigating these challenges in her collaboration with her research assistant Mariam Taher. Their approach to co-researching is detailed in the book's introduction, and its success is manifested in their co-written chapter 4, which delivers an up-close and often moving ethnographic study of how urban Egyptians acquire (or struggle to acquire) their allotted rations of subsidized bread.

Staple Security is clearly an important book, essential reading across the multiple disciplines engaged in understanding the workings of food systems and the pursuit of food security. It is also a delight to read. In addition to being thorough in her research, Barnes is keenly observant and a talented storyteller. She discusses her interlocutors' lives with insight and compassion, bringing to life the joys and trials that define daily experience yet often go unnoticed. Readers may well find themselves pausing to consider their own quotidian practices of securing food, practices that ultimately connect us all.

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