

**Barnes, Jessica. 2022. *Staple Security. Bread and Wheat in Egypt*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 320 pp. Pb.: \$27.95. ISBN: 9781478018520.**

Book review by

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This “story of bread” in Egypt, where everyone eats bread three times a day and nationally surpasses that of other states, is quotidian at first glance but foundational at the second. Although Barnes introduces *Staple Security* as a book “just about bread” (p. 27), the author implicitly entrusts the reader with grasping a deeper story, revealing dichotomies not as distant as they first appear: nation–state, international–internal affairs, and even rich–poor. In this manner, Barnes’s objective is to introduce the concept of staple security as active “multiscaled practices,” as she aims to “examine the ongoing efforts by various individuals and institutions to counter the threat of insufficient or poor-quality wheat and bread” (p. 22). The long-term ethnography, working with a research assistant, and thorough archival work are masterfully exploited tools that the author relies on while following wheat “from seed to bread” (p. xii), consecutively awarding each chapter its piece of this process.

The Introduction reviews different kinds of bread in Egypt, presents a round loaf of *baladi* bread as “the most staple of staples” (p. 76), and debates food sovereignty and food security, underlying their critical limitations. For the author, staple security allows reviewing the “valence” of bread as a staple, relying on its key characteristics as defining features of meals, accompanying other foods, and holding symbolic resonance (p. 19). Later, throughout the book, the author shows various processes and actions through which staple security manifests itself.

Chapter One, *Staple Becoming*, delves into the historical accounts of wheat and bread in Egypt, tracing their influence on, and profound importance for, the modern state. The lack of satisfying bread can lead to national and individual anxieties, but subsidized *bal-*

*adi* bread, a low-priced staple, ensures popular support. “The more wheat Egypt can produce, the better” (p. 54), and the more resistant the seed is, the more confidence there is in the bread supply across the nation. Hence, new dwarf seeds, innovative approaches to cultivation, and the Egyptian state’s alteration of bread’s price, weight, composition, and style are the results of the more profound staple security objectives of the state apparatus.

The following two chapters, *Gold of the Land* and *Grain on the Move*, detail the procurement of wheat domestically and internationally. While the Egyptian state procures half of its wheat domestically and the other half internationally, most home-grown wheat comes from small-scale farmers (p. 111). Despite receiving remuneration at a market price for their wheat, farmers’ “affective orientations” (p. 94) of self-reliance through wheat and investment in other vegetables, such as onions (p. 109), often run contrary to the objectives of the state. Although domestic wheat is deemed superior to international wheat, Egypt is the biggest wheat importer, and various forces shape its geopolitical trade relationships. While the end consumer is the Egyptian nation, global traders, other states, and political alliances are influencing forces without particular emotional attachment to the result – *baladi* bread (p. 120). On the other hand, to secure national peace through the wheat supply for the five months ahead, Egypt goes to great lengths to revamp storage, build modern silos, and even battle corruption.

Chapter Four, on Subsidized Bread’s contemporary life, was written with Mariam Taher, a research assistant. Barnes and Taher follow *baladi* bread from baking at small-scale, privately owned bakeries to individual households. They portray individuals who obtain this bread through a ration card or without it (paying the full price, although still low compared to other types of bread) and individual actions to preserve bread’s quality (pp. 186-8). Although with substantial inadequacies of bureaucracy and occasional card frauds, the relative success of the 2014 reform that brought the use of smart cards ensured a better quality of *baladi* bread and its availability, as bread is “one medium through which people assess the quality of the state” (p. 181).

Chapter Five, *Homemade Bread*, intimately brings the reader to the rural houses of those who bake their own bread. Although baked mainly in the villages, homemade bread travels to the city via “local knowledge networks” to be enjoyed by cities’ residents, producing reciprocal social relationships (pp. 197-8). However, as the grain has to be milled, the bread has to be baked for weeks ahead and properly stored (p. 209). The importance of homemade baking traditions comes from the bread’s perceived local taste qualities and represents a cultural value that deserves to be cataloged in the national

archives and museums. While for some, homemade bread is a cultural artifact, for others, it still manifests gendered and social relationships.

The Conclusion brings back the theoretical concept of staple security and expands it with other international examples, such as water and energy. By “disaggregating” these various securities, Barnes shows how security is not a mere “descriptor” but a process for understanding the actions of numerous actors, ranging from states to individuals, and invites readers to untangle other securities, emphasizing such work with the pressure of climate change.

By introducing various objectives, be they increased seed productivity and resilience for plant breeders (p. 54), stable wheat supply and less reliance on import for the state (p. 110), meeting household needs for farmers (pp. 58, 83), or availability of satisfying *baladi* bread for Egyptians with smart cards, Barnes showcases multiplicity and complexity of bread as a staple within staple security ongoing processes. Her incredibly well-researched work would be of great importance to those involved with food and security studies and anthropologists and geographers “interested in environment-society interactions” (p. xii). Overall, *Staple Security* allows for another sort of appreciation of staple food, whether it is in Egypt or any other location.