

The Price of Homemade Bread

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Notwithstanding a shift toward more sugars, fats, and proteins that mirrors a global trend, cereals, largely in the form of bread, remain the staple of the Moroccan diet and, indeed, of Moroccan (food) culture. Most Moroccans eat bread with nearly every meal: It is the tool to pick up food, the conveyor of a dish's taste, the guarantor of physical satiation, and the basis of sharing and hospitality. Yet, as my ethnographic research in the cities of Marrakech and Beni Mellal revealed, not all bread is equal. There are multiple and contested qualities that define “good” bread.

At the same time, bread is politically sensitive. Despite gradual economic liberalization and rapidly rising global wheat prices, the Moroccan government keeps flour and bread prices low to avoid social unrest. In such a context, asking what good bread is means asking who determines its values and how, and evokes hierarchies of power and the ways they are challenged by ordinary people, similar to the other cases in this article. I document how mundane daily practices such as breadmaking in urban Morocco subtly resist governmental wheat policies, which, willingly or not, destabilize these very practices.

Following Counihan (1999), I treat bread as a Maussian “total social fact,” connecting not just the economic and sociocultural, but also the political, aesthetic, symbolic and physiological dimensions of everyday life. As such, bread intimately connects ordinary people to their government. What does it mean when values, bodies and power are materially and symbolically connected and condensed in a loaf of bread? To answer these questions, I propose a theory of value that incorporates “the importance of actions” (Graeber 2001), in particular homemaking and women's domestic labor.

[INSERT Figure 5.1 - Graf]

When exploring breadmaking practices to understand what good bread is and for whom, two seemingly contradictory values stand out. Although cheap flour and bread were

highly valued by all my research participants (see also Prieto-Piastro below), whose poverty and food insecurity made price a key consideration in daily practices of sourcing and preparing cereal products, homemade flour and bread were equally cherished. In making and eating bread, ordinary citizens are thus not only symbolically but also materially connected to their government, whose political legitimacy historically rests on its ability to provide food security. By guaranteeing a minimal supply of cheap flour and bread, the *makhzen* (literally “granary,” but also designating the monarchy and its political allies) that rules the country since the seventeenth century has been able to stay in power to the present day (Holden 2009). Despite a general trend toward economic liberalization since the 1980s, a large section of wheat production and distribution is still controlled through flexible import tariffs, subsidies, and price controls to assure a steady and cheap supply of mainly industrially milled flour and commercially produced bread. The production of soft wheat (*fors*) has benefited from government-supported modernization and expansion since the French Protectorate (1912–56), but nearly half of domestically consumed soft wheat is still imported.

At the same time, homemaking and women’s domestic labor are key ingredients of bread’s value, women’s increasing participation in the labor market notwithstanding. Most families I worked with had rural origins and self-identified as poor, and all invariably preferred homemade leavened bread for its better taste and texture, its spiritual and bodily benefits, and a general desire “to know where it comes from and what’s in it.” For many of them, its preparation included the bulk sourcing of domestically grown hard wheat (*gmeh*) grains through kin in the rural hinterlands or on the weekly market, as well as milling and sieving these into flour in small neighborhood mills. To make bread, this wholemeal flour was then blended with cheap, industrially milled, and refined soft wheat flour.

[INSERT Figure 5.2 - Graf]

By kneading cheap flour into their daily bread, these families thus “stretched” the more expensive and labor-intensive homemade flour. Only the poorest of my research

participants bought commercially produced bread on a regular basis, and even they still sought to buy bread that contained at least some wholemeal flour, and made their own bread whenever they could. Homemade bread thus ambiguously blends affordable and cheap, but otherwise undesirable and foreign, soft wheat flour with pricey and labor-intensive, but domestically grown and knowable, hard wheat grains. While the former is the basis of urban food security and valued as such in both everyday breadmaking practices and governmental policies similar to IRRI rice in Bangladesh (Dewan), the latter allows ordinary and predominantly poor urban Moroccans to uphold values associated with their rural origins (Graf forthcoming) and allows them to reclaim some form of power vis-à-vis their government.

Thus, by making good bread, urban Moroccans express both their continued expectation of cheap flour and bread, while at the same time upholding agricultural and rural values that stand in sharp contrast to governmental policies benefiting imports and large-scale agriculture and displacing smaller-scale domestic wheat production.

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