

BREAD NOVICE

خَلِينَا نَتَكَلَّمُ عَنِ السِّيَاسَةِ!



The famous 'bread helmet' from Tahrir Square.
Photograph: Khaled Abdullah Ali Al Mahdi/Reuters

In the previous step, we saw how bread has been adopted as symbol of nourishment and sustenance in music and poetry. Perhaps for similar reasons, bread has also played a role as a symbol of anger at political regimes that people have found wanting in their provision of both. Let's read, watch, and learn more about these political dimensions of bread. To begin, let's read a short poem written in the United States in 1915 and consider some brief questions:

BREAD NOVICE

OUR DAILY BREAD

*On the "Hunger Parade" of the unemployed—Chicago,
January 17th, 1915*

"Give us this day our daily bread—
Give us our right," the hungry said.
Walking along the darkening way,
"Give us our daily bread," we say.

Hark to the tread of the sullen feet,
Marching down the sleety street:
Hunger staggers along the way.
"Give us our bread and work—today!"

Swaying banners overhead—
"Give us this day our daily bread."
Masses of men and women throng—
Living witness of living wrong.

"Work, not charity!" is the cry.
Is it sincere—I know not, I!
What can I give but some small dole?
But—will that satisfy my soul?

Buffeting through the wind and the rain,
They will pass again and again,
Menacing all who are sleek and fed:
"Give—or we'll take—our daily bread."

Reads like a story of long ago:
"Driven by want, driven by woe,
Peasants arose and began to slay:"
But it all happened yesterday.

Reads like a tale from some far-off land,
Countries we do not understand
(Where there will be the devil to pay!)
But— it all happened across the way.

Rita Benton.

Rita Benton, in Poetry - A Magazine of Verse, Volume VIII (1915)

- What event does this poem refer to? What social issues are it concerned with?
- What do you think the author is using bread to symbolize?
- If the speakers in the poem are not given their "bread," what do they say they'll do?

Now, with these questions in mind, let's move to the Arab world. Read the following article and take notes in preparation for more in-depth discussion:



BREAD NOVICE**Use your loaf: why food prices were crucial in the Arab spring**

From **THE GUARDIAN** <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jul/17/bread-food-arab-spring>

People in Arab countries have always relied on bread as a low-cost source of sustenance. In Yemen alone there are more than 20 different kinds of bread, each made and baked differently. In Egypt, bread is known as aish, meaning “life”. It is the inseparable companion of all dishes, even some desserts. The Fertile Crescent, stretching from the Egyptian Nile to the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates, is where agriculture began, where wheat, lentils, chickpeas, sheep and goats and olives were first cultivated. Today, that same region is the largest importer of food in the world.

When grain prices spiked in 2007-2008, Egypt's bread prices rose 37%. With unemployment rising as well, more people depended on subsidised bread – but the government did not make any more available. Egypt's annual food price inflation continued and had hit 18.9% before the fall of President Mubarak.

Fifty per cent of the calories consumed by Egyptians originate outside its borders. Egypt is the world's largest wheat importer, and no country in the region (except for Syria) produces more than a small fraction of the wheat it consumes. Should the global markets be unable to provide a country's need, or if there are not enough funds

available to finance purchases and to offer price support, then the food of the poor will become inaccessible to them. Already, in Egypt and Yemen, more than 40% of the population live below the poverty line and suffer from some form of malnutrition. Most of the poor in these countries have no access to social safety nets. Images of bread became central to the Egyptian protests, from young boys selling kaik, a breakfast bread, to one protester's improvised helmet made from bread loaves taped to his head. Although the Arab revolutions were united under the slogan “the people want to bring down the regime” not “the people want more bread”, food was a catalyst.

“Bread riots” have been occurring regularly since the mid 1980s, following policies brought to us by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Among these were the reduction of agricultural subsidies and the encouragement of production of fruits and vegetables for export, at the expense of investing in local grain production. Export of value-added produce and the import of basic commodities such as wheat were monopolised by a small group of “entrepreneurs” protected by the security state who financially backed the ruling elite. The powerful countries provided encouragement and support. The US gave

Egypt around \$1.7bn last year, exceeded only by the \$2.4bn it gave to Israel. Tunisia under President Ben Ali was viewed as the IMF model of “growth” and France offered to support him militarily through the uprising.

The first protests of the Arab spring in Tunisia in December 2010 were quickly dismissed as another bout of bread riots. Arab regimes responded by making adjustments to food prices and offering more subsidies. Increasing the subsidy slightly relieves the popular pressure but also increases the profit margins for importers and manufacturers. But this time round, truckloads of flour did not do the trick.

Three trading giants, Cargill, ADM and Bunge control 90% of the global grain trade. They are all based in the United States. We know that if we do not improve food security we will remain hostage to those in power. Already the Egyptian interim government has decided to support farmers who produce wheat instead of the importers. It is too early to tell the extent of the programme but advisers to the new Egyptian agriculture minister have confirmed that it includes higher prices paid for local wheat, seed supply, agricultural extension assistance and improved local storage and transport.

We have tasted the bread of liberty and we want more of it.

**SECOND, LET'S
WATCH THIS
DOCUMENTARY:**



Now, let's discuss:

- What are some of the specific conditions led to the discontentment that resulted in the Arab Spring in Egypt?
- Why were people taping bread to their heads and waving it in the air?
- Do you think the economic situation in Egypt is likely to improve? What sort of factors are at play here -- both within the country's control, and outside of it?
- Is “bread riot” a term unique to Egypt and the Arab spring? If not, can you think of other historical instances in which this term has been used?