

# Reviews

*The Problem with Feeding Cities: The Social Transformation of Infrastructure, Abundance, and Inequality in America*

Andrew Deener

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2020  
328 pp. Illustrations. \$97.50 (hardcover); \$32.50 (paper);  
\$31.99 (eBook)

Andrew Deener's fascinating book represents an important contribution to the sparsely populated field of social studies of food infrastructure. In recent years, the social sciences have become deeply interested in infrastructures and have dutifully produced a flurry of studies of water, electric, rail, internet, and other systems. Amidst the growing body of work that has emerged from the "infrastructural turn," discussions of food infrastructures have been largely absent. This may be in part, as Deener suggests, because food infrastructures were developed not through centrally planned and subsidized works (as in water or electricity), but rather as market systems, in which profit logic and the quest for efficiency drew together a heterogeneous array of private actors in contingent and piecemeal fashion. Yet food infrastructures, no less than rail or energy, construct spatial and social relations and inequalities. *The Problem with Feeding Cities* represents an ambitious attempt to unpack the black box of fresh food provisioning in the United States and theorize the role of food infrastructure in shaping the contemporary city—in this case, Philadelphia. While readers will learn a great deal about the city's historic and contemporary food system, the book is primarily an effort to describe a provisioning infrastructure as it *intersects with* and ultimately exceeds the city. Philadelphia is thus a node in a larger network, but one of the book's virtues is revealing how urban processes—from suburbanization to redevelopment and gentrification—shape and are shaped by the food provisioning infrastructure.

*The Problem with Feeding Cities* broaches two broad lines of inquiry: (1) how the complex and often invisible provisioning systems upon which life depends are created and

maintained; and (2) how infrastructures reveal and shape political and social relations. Deener sweepingly defines infrastructure as an array of social and technical ties between agricultures, manufacturing, storage, communication, and commerce. These "mutually reinforcing interdependencies," he argues, can be understood as three historically distinct but overlapping "infrastructural regimes": feeding cities, feeding regions, and feeding the nation. In more or less chronological fashion, Deener shows how fresh food provisioning moved away from urban centers into suburbs and increasingly transnational networks in which a quest for efficiency and profit has created a mass-market system of year-round abundance where entire territories and populations are abandoned, underserved, and excluded. In spite of this diagnosis, Deener insists that infrastructural regimes do not change in a top-down deterministic manner. Rather, they appear as a result of multiple actors proposing solutions to uncertainties and conflicts.

Deener relies on archives and oral history in the early parts of the book to tell the story of how transformations in urban settlement and governance patterns intersect with changing food infrastructures. He traces the rise and fall of Philadelphia's urban wholesale food markets and groceries as they gave way to the rise of "combination markets" and suburban distribution networks. This shift from "feeding cities" to "feeding regions," Deener shows, gave rise to food deserts and infrastructural exclusion that exacerbated urban inequalities. He then goes on to narrate the shift from urban to suburban provisioning through the lens of sociotechnical change, focusing on the way in which a particular infrastructure—the barcode—emerged and came to redefine the grocery system, as well as the entire way of supplying, tracing, and selling food. We learn how Walmart and other large chains came to supplant previous grocery chains by creating logistical infrastructures that allowed new, previously unfathomable economies of scale to emerge.

When Deener moves to discussing the shift to the infrastructural regime of "feeding the nation," in chapter 5, he

tackles the problem of *how* an infrastructure developed to “maintain the standard quality of decomposing objects for a mass-merchandizing system” (175). The discussion of standardization, perishability, and logistics is fascinating. Drawing on interviews with diverse intermediaries and observations of different logistical sites, Deener takes us beyond the well-known case of refrigeration to speak to controlled-atmosphere warehouse owners and representatives of particular varieties of fruit. We learn that assembling the produce aisle entails not simply logistical coordination but also efforts to educate consumers and sellers.

The book ends by taking us back down to Philadelphia to look at how the demands and contingencies of this global, standard-driven, just-in-time food infrastructure creates problems and demands that can then be turned into new distributions circuits and forms of knowledge. Key here is the insight that standardization creates hierarchies of value and compliance, as well as economies “at the margins” of the norm, that exploit the opportunities offered by failures and uncertainties. In this sense, we can see infrastructure as a law-like normative system in which “the cracks in the system get converted into institutional methods of distribution” (202). Thus emerge “channels” of varying levels of formality, together with intermediaries who help funnel foods into new consumer markets, from food banks to brokers, as well as those who eschew the economy based on standards and mass marketing, such as local food or ugly food movements.

*The Problem with Feeding Cities* is a theoretically and empirically ambitious book. It draws on a wide variety of methods—from participant observation to interview to archival work—and a broad range of theoretical discussions from urban studies, anthropology, science and technology studies, and beyond. While the introduction attempts to draw the different chapters together into an overarching argument and (somewhat jargon-heavy) discussion of infrastructure, the beauty in this book is in the diverse stories and voices that appear in the chapters. One of this book’s greatest contributions is the act of illuminating and giving voice to a series of actors who have been too frequently overlooked in studies of food systems: intermediaries of various sorts. Along with the familiar figures of wholesale merchants and vendors, we are introduced to brokers, owners of atmosphere-controlled warehouses in international ports, produce board employees, US Department of Agriculture officials, packing house owners, packaging providers, and more. Approaching infrastructures through the lens of (inter)mediation—what the anthropologist Sally Merry (2006) calls “mapping the middle”—allows for what may seem like totalizing systems (“food regimes”) to be disaggregated and understood pragmatically. It also reveals

the importance of understanding what stands between the proverbial farm and table in terms of crafting policies and theories that can adequately confront the “problem with feeding cities.”

—Tiana Bakić Hayden, *El Colegio de México*

#### REFERENCE

Merry, Sally Engle. 2006. “Transnational Human Rights and Local Activism: Mapping the Middle.” *American Anthropologist* 108.1: 38–51.

#### *Peach State*

Adrienne Su

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021

110 pp. \$17.00 (paper); (eBook available)

The words “hunger” or “hungry” appear perhaps more often than any other in *Peach State*, Adrienne Su’s evocative new collection of food-centric, Atlanta-centric poems that grapple with the contours of Chinese American identity in a changing American South. “Father” and “Mother” and other familial relations appear frequently as well in a book that pays homage to the “generations / who have departed, but left instructions” (9) via the words of recipes and the imprints of memory. Although hunger is a consistent presence, Su writes that “the shape of hunger has progressed” (69), foregrounding the fundamental orientation of these poems toward modes, conditions, and moments of transformation, and toward the role that form plays in poetic and food practices. “Satiety” shows up just once, while “full” appears more often, in reference to a basket (5), an agenda (45), a house (49), a table (68), and a life (98).

In between hunger and fullness, however, are processes of change. Whether grappling with transformations of food, place, ingredients, recipes, identity, or poetic form, Su skillfully navigates the progressions from one form to another, the constants that remain amid the changes, and the moments of freedom and flourishing that exist and thrive alongside and amid constraints.

Some of Su’s work can be read as a meta-statement on methodological and conceptual elements of poetry itself. She works as a professor of creative writing and poet-in-residence at Dickinson College, and that combination of skillful practice and poetic theory comes through clearly. In “Peking Duck Three Ways,” Su locates her reader at “A meeting of imagination and economy” (68), an intersection at which duck is prepared and presented to the table, and an intersection, on the level of poetics, that begins to describe what