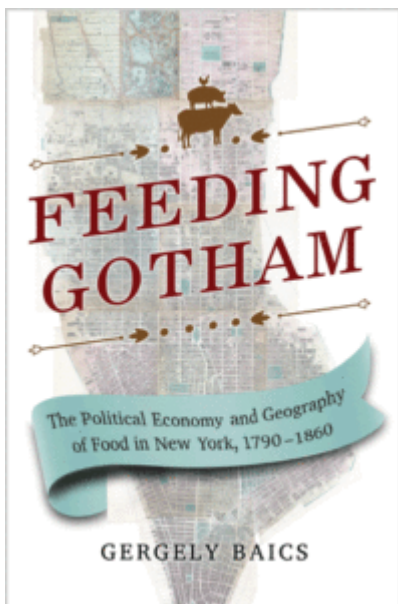
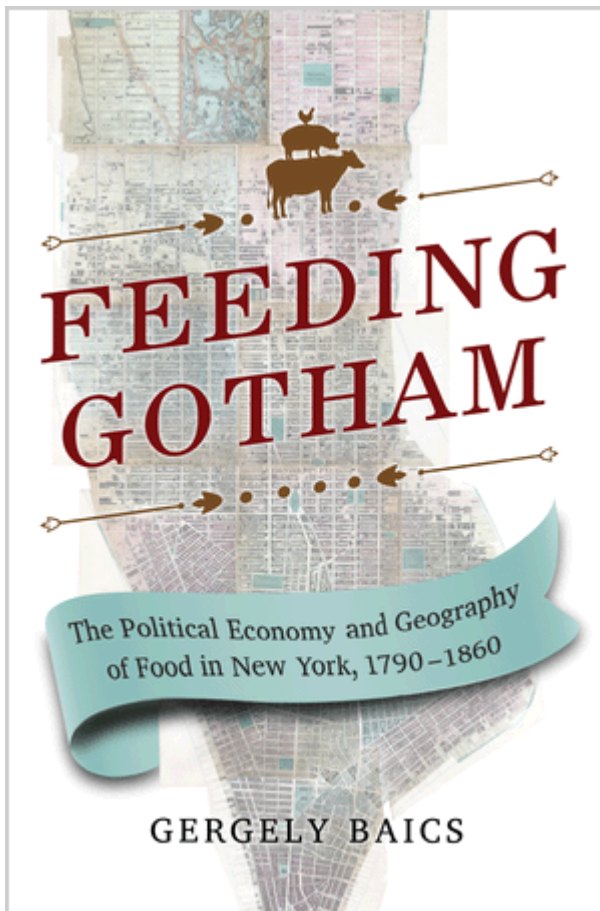


# Slaughterhouse Rules: The Deregulation of Food Markets in Antebellum New York



Gergely Baics, *Feeding Gotham: The Political Economy of Geography and Food in New York, 1790-1860*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 368 pp., \$39.95.

Between 1790 and 1860, New York's population increased dramatically, from under 35,000 to over 800,000. Gergely Baics examines how the city's food system provided or failed to provide for its inhabitants as an infrastructure of public markets ceded to a deregulated sprawl of private purveyors. *Feeding Gotham* will be of interest to students of urban planning, geography, and social and economic history, as well as those engaged with the history and politics of food systems. In his conclusion, Baics pays special attention to the concept of "food deserts" in cities as a contemporary vocabulary for understanding problems of urban food justice and malnutrition, and he offers several comparative examples of how other cities have regulated their food supplies.

The book is organized into three parts. In part I, Baics explains the rationale for municipal public markets to provide citizens with access to food, narrating their emergence from colonial community institutions to their eventual deregulation through the Common Council's 1843 repeal of market laws. These laws excluded unlicensed vendors and non-market butchers, whose success in spite of restriction had challenged the legitimacy of public markets. Gradually, many consumers came to believe the fees and rents associated with public markets increased the price of food unnecessarily. For their part, public officials began to question the cost of maintaining market infrastructure. Part II assesses how well the public market system fulfilled its objectives from the 1790s to the 1820s, concluding that it was largely successful in providing abundant and quality food for the city's growing population. Throughout his analysis, Baics focuses primarily on meat, which he argues was a dietary staple, most susceptible to problems of quality and supply, and thus most constitutive of the municipal regulatory regime.

Part III narrates the debates leading to the emergence of the free market system of provisioning from the 1830s, which he subjects to the same standards of evaluation applied to the public market system. Baics has new insights into the so-called "antebellum paradox" explored by economic and demographic historians: that is, that increasing morbidity and decreasing standards of health accompanied rapid economic growth and rising per capita income. He pays special attention to the negative effects borne by poor New Yorkers by deteriorating availability and quality of food supplies, noting that deregulation introduced a "more complex, uneven, and riskier terrain of provisioning" (228). He concludes that "the liberalization of food markets propelled a formerly more egalitarian resource to become another structural layer of inequality, much like housing and sanitation" (235).

Baics observes that the deregulation of food provisioning did not signify a total movement toward liberalization or attenuation of municipal government. Rather, the infrastructure of public markets competed with the Croton aqueduct and other public goods and services for revenue, generating a bifurcated antebellum political economy. Against histories that attribute deregulation entirely to free market ideology, Baics argues that "the question was not whether the municipal government had an important role to play but rather in what areas of economic and social life public investments and regulatory

oversight should be extended and where free-market relations should prevail" (4). While water became a municipally managed public utility, food provisioning was wholly deregulated.

Why then did food follow a path of extreme liberalization? Baics emphasizes aspects of the debate related to market supply, price, competition from independent vendors, and the cost of operating public markets. He focuses his analysis on prominent interest groups, including subscribers, licensed and unlicensed butchers, and the City Corporation, which owned and managed the public markets. In his analysis and selection of evidence, Baics prefers William Novak's concept of a "well-ordered market" to E.P. Thompson's "moral economy" because of the former's narrower focus on regulatory frameworks and supposed lack of normative implication (25-6). Apart from the question of whether Thompson's framing is applicable to nineteenth-century New York, some will object that markets cannot be understood apart from ideological, normative, and affective forms of politics that constitute them. Some readers will crave more discussion of the broader context of these debates, including the roles of commodity price fluctuation, Democratic and Locofoco movements for free markets, and instances of public demonstration and rioting in shaping public debate over access to resources and their proper government. Historians of the early republic will seek to connect the debates over public markets to a now rich literature on responses to the Panic of 1837, proliferation of paper currency, and the role of informal markets in structuring the antebellum economy.

Baics identifies his as a "history of food access" rather than "a history of food" (6), distinguishing his approach from social and cultural histories provided by Cindy Lobel's *Urban Appetites*, for example. This is a useful way of communicating to readers why he focuses on public markets and butchers as the principle points of food access for antebellum New Yorkers. It also justifies his focus on meat, which occupied an outsized share of urban diets in this period. Baics provides new estimates of meat consumption for the period, which constitute a significant contribution to our understanding of urban diets and provisions.

The formulation of "food access" nevertheless concedes the legitimacy of defining food primarily in terms of supply, security, or availability. Once defined purely in terms of food quantity and basic nutrition, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N. now interprets "food security" as stable and universal "physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and *food preferences* [emphasis mine] for an active and healthy life." In the case of the antebellum United States, dietary preference was for high consumption of red meat, a relatively expensive source of calories. The abundant supply in public markets justifies Baics's assessment that they succeeded in supplying the city's growing population with fresh and abundant food. He does not choose to explore the long-term sustainability of this consumer taste, or the cultural values that informed the choice of meat as a dietary staple. Similar analysis could be

applied to the choice of wheat over rye and maize as staple grains, and to diets consisting primarily of meat and grain.

Inasmuch as food is a cultural object in addition to a biological requirement, histories of food may help to explain why this necessity of life followed a different regulatory path than water or housing. Histories of diet, cooking, eating, and restaurant culture thus provide complementary rather than disparate approaches to Baics's analysis of access. Chronologically, it pairs well with Katie Turner's account of the emergence of a federal regulatory system for food quality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also complements an emerging literature linking the feeding of captive populations and worker-citizens in the modern nation state. These related histories of food cultures offer to broaden Baics's analysis beyond cities and to the world food systems in which they are embedded.

The great gift of *Feeding Gotham* is its methodological innovation and its painstaking tabulation and analysis of data. Baics showcases the potential of geographic information systems (GIS) as a tool for historical analysis, using GIS to reconstruct New York's public market system and the proliferation of private food shops that followed its deregulation. The exciting collection of color maps provides visualizations of the meat supply system from slaughterhouse to point of sale over the course of the antebellum period. This creative use of quantitative analysis is a model for how historical geography can provide new insights into economic development and urban history, as well as the opportunities provided by the large-scale digitization of archival records. Baics draws on geospatial data compiled from digitized city directories, fire insurance atlases, and geo-referenced historical maps in the collections of the New York Public Library and New-York Historical Society.

Baics has reflected elsewhere on the promises of GIS as an analytic tool. Given the author's creativity and command of these methods for historical analysis, one also wants to hear him reflect on their possible limits, and the challenges of following "the spatial turn." Baics identifies cities as centers of conflict over political economy because of their scale and novelty, and the extremity of problems that emerged as a result. Even so, recent urban environmental histories such as Catherine McNeur's *Taming Manhattan* have reminded us that cities are inseparable from the natures in which they are embedded. Most immediately relevant here is New York's reliance on outlying areas for its food supplies. Baics's analysis of urban crisis and reconfiguration invites new histories of provisioning that break down the imagined boundaries between urban and rural and the political economies they justified.

For the social historian, one of Baics's most exciting chapters is his study of the Catherine Street market, derived from a close reading of the nineteenth-century New York butcher Thomas F. DeVoe's history of municipal food markets. Baics bookends this chapter with DeVoe's account of popular dance contests staged at the market, hosted by the butchers and featuring slaves and free blacks from Long Island to New Jersey. Baics argues that these exhibitions

reiterated the social hierarchy of the market. Exploitative entertainments sponsored by the butchers helped structure the community's performance of market rules. His analysis brings to mind Brian Rouleau's account of minstrel shows aboard Commodore Perry's 1853 naval expedition to Japan. Here also, entertainments featuring racist tropes and hierarchies provided the context for diplomatic negotiation and market relations. Notably, Baics uses the metaphor of "neighborhood ecology" (125) rather than economy to characterize the Catherine Street market, suggesting that political economy, geography, or supply-and-demand are insufficient optics to understand how the legitimacy of markets and community loyalty to them were secured.

Ecology demands a rendering of social relations that are often flattened by quantitative and cartographic representation, and it is to Baics's credit that he includes the study of the Catherine Street market in a book that pursues synthetic geographical approaches. Here and throughout the book, Baics grounds his analysis in a careful reading of the lived experience of New Yorkers of all walks of life in pursuit of their daily bread or meat. The result is a careful attempt to understand how one major city managing massive demographic growth reconfigured access to food. Baics's primary concern is to understand the benefits and costs of public markets and their deregulation for the living standards and material well-being of all of the city's inhabitants. These questions remain essential.

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