Course objective: This course covers the U.S. food system from a historical and institutional perspective, with a goal of developing an understanding of the positive and negative aspects of the U.S. food system. It is divided into three parts. The first gives historical background on the development of the contemporary food system. The second reviews major debates about the future of the food system. And the third reviews alternative action approaches for changing the food system.

Course requirements/grading

Class Participation 25%
Group presentation 25%
Midterm Essay 25%
Final Essay 25%

Required Books

Course Policies
Class is primarily discussion based. Our learning depends on your preparation, attendance, and participation in class. Please come to each class prepared and ready to discuss the topic of the day. Being prepared means having read the assigned articles and having questions and reactions in mind. Assigned readings are required. There are additional readings for each topic that you may consult if you wish to delve deeper into a topic.

Assignments
- Weekly reading and group presentations

As you complete your weekly reading assignment read to answer these four questions:
1. What is the main question the reading is trying to answer?
2. What is the context in which that question is important? What motivates the question?
3. What main argument or answer to that question does the author pose?
4. What evidence does the author offer to support that argument?

You will be assigned to groups of 3-4 classmates and 1-2 class topics/meeting days. You will be responsible for preparing a brief (10-minute) group presentation that answers these questions for the assigned readings at the start of class as a way to get our discussion going. In addition to summarizing the material, you should comment on something you found surprising or confusing, the connections or disconnects you saw
among the material, and/or on how you relate them to your personal experience or observations.

- Midterm essay (Due Oct 29)
  Write a six-page essay citing every assigned reading through (and including) October 13. DO NOT SUMMARIZE. Focus your essays on what you found surprising, counterintuitive, confusing, or illuminating about the readings. Use the space to draw connections or distinctions between the readings and to connect them to your personal and professional experiences and goals. This is a very challenging writing task. You will need to distill your response to each reading to one or two sentences.

- Final essay (Due Dec 18):
  Write a six-page essay citing every assigned reading from October 20 through (and including) December 15. DO NOT SUMMARIZE. Focus your essays on what you found surprising, counterintuitive, confusing, or illuminating about the readings. Use the space to draw connections or distinctions between the readings and to connect them to your personal and professional experiences and goals. This is a very challenging writing task. You will need to distill your response to each reading to one or two sentences. Focus especially on how your ideas about these topics might have changed through course discussion and readings.

Statement on Disability Services
Any student who needs an accommodation should register with the Disability Support Service.

Office Hours
Tuesdays, 4-6 pm; 411 Lafayette St, 5th floor. By appointment. Please call the main office line to schedule a 20 minute appointment: 212 998 5580.

Class Schedule

7 Sep  Introductory Class
14 Sep What's the debate about food systems all about?

Alternative paradigms for the food Systems Sustainability: Productionism, Life Science Integration, and Ecological Integration.

Required Readings
Lang and Heasman Chapters 1 and 2.


Reading Questions

- What are the different components of the “food system” or “world of food” that the authors identify? What does it mean to study them in isolation versus in an integrated way?
- What is a “food paradigm”? What are the different paradigms and what makes them coherent perspectives and different from each other?
- What is the “Food war”? What are they areas of conflict? Who are the combatants in this war?
- The Allen et al. piece was written in 1991. Comparing with the discussion in Lang and Heaseman, how far do you think we have we come in our discussion of food systems sustainability since then? Why or why not?
21 Sep How did we get to this food system?

Historical Background I: Property, Land, and Capitalism

Required Readings


Additional Readings


Reading Questions

- What is private property? As opposed to what? Where did it come from?
- What were the arguments for and against enclosure? Specifically, what is the “tragedy of the commons”?
- What does private property have to do with the division of labor?
- What was meant by “agricultural improvement” in the debate about enclosures? How does this relate to the history of contemporary food system and the “food wars” debates?
28 Sep How were agriculture and food production linked to the development of the capitalist economy in the U.S.?

**Historical Background II: Colonial and post-colonial food regimes in the U.S.**

**Required Readings**


**Additional Readings**


**Reading Questions**

- Why does Cronon end chapter 1 with von Tuenen’s isolated state? How does cronon’s argument about the relationship between agriculture and the city relate to a perspective like Von Tuenen’s?
- Specifically, what process created Midwestern cities and what created Midwestern agriculture?
- What was the significance of canals, railways, grain elevators, and the telegraph in creating the modern food system?
- What problems did the standardization of grain solve? How did this shift risks, power, and profit among food systems actors?
5 Oct Where did ‘industrial’ agriculture come from and why?

**Historical Background III: Fordism and Agriculture in the U.S.**


**Additional Readings**


Lobao, L. and K. Meyer *The great agricultural transition: Crisis, change, and social consequences of Twentieth Century U.S. Farming*. *Annual Review of Sociology*; 2001; 27.


**Reading Questions**

- What is the difference between ‘pluralist’ political representation in the U.S. and ‘corporatist’ political representation in France and Japan?
- Where does this difference come from?
- How does this difference shape the States’ responses to the problems of agricultural modernization and of surplus production/low prices in different historical periods?
- What is ‘Fordism’? How has politics shaped the historical relationship between farming, industry, and consumers?
Who are the powerful actors in today’s food system and what are their interests?

**The Food System, Post-1980**

[http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/128315/2/AgriculturalContracting.pdf](http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/128315/2/AgriculturalContracting.pdf)


[http://californiaagriculture.ucanr.edu/landingpage.cfm?i=i&article=ca.v056n05p146](http://californiaagriculture.ucanr.edu/landingpage.cfm?i=i&article=ca.v056n05p146)


*Additional Readings*


*Reading Questions*

- What are the different kinds of risks that farmers confront?
- How does agricultural policy address these risks?
- How do contracts mitigate these risks?
- What is the relationship between risk and vertical integration?
- What’s the relationship between risk and the scale of production?
- What is the relationship between (domestic and global) competition and risk?
- What are the potential benefits and costs of retail and food processing concentration for farmers and for consumers?
- Why do pressures for reducing agricultural subsidies arise in the US, Japan, and Europe?
- What do you think Sheinhgates’s study teaches us about changing the food system in the U.S.?
19 Oct What are the agri-food system’s effects on the environment and what’s to be done about it?

Contemporary food systems debates I: Agriculture and the Environment

Altieri, M. A. ‘Ecological impacts of industrial agriculture and the possibilities for truly sustainable farming’ *Monthly Review*; Jul/Aug 1998; 50, 3; Research Library pg. 60


http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/31372/1/33010024.pdf

Additional Readings


Lang and Heasman. Ch 4.


McHughen, Allan. “Fighting Mother Nature with Biotechnology” *Oxford Handbook of Food Politics and Society*


Watson, Derrill. “Climate Change and Agriculture: Countering Doomsday Scenarios” *Oxford Handbook of Food Politics and Society*

Reading Questions

- What is the relationship between variability, risk, and environmental damage—i.e. why and how is variability seen as the root problem by all the authors?
- These approaches differ fundamentally from one another in how they deal with the problem of variability. Altieri focusses on the structure of the production system, Lichtenberg on regulation, and Bongiovanni and Lowenberg-Debour on technology. Which of these approaches do you find most convincing? Most practical?
26 Oct What are the food system’s effects on human health?

Contemporary food systems debates II: Public Health and Food Access


Lang and Heasman. Ch 5.


Additional Readings

Lang and Heasman. Ch 3.


Reading Questions

- What are the causes of obesity and other diet-related public-health problems discussed in the readings?
- What do the authors’ argue or imply about the relationship between public-health problems, food access, and food preferences of different populations?
- What evidence do they offer?
- What do the readings suggest to you about the different ways it is possible or desirable to manipulate human behavior to address these problems?

Assignment: midterm essay due October 29 11:59pm
What role should or can the agri-food system play in sustaining rural communities?

Contemporary food systems debates III: Rural Development and Labor

Required Readings


Additional Readings

Review the materials on this website.


- What is meant by multifunctional agriculture? What are the multiple functions that agriculture plays within a community, a nation-state, or the globe?
- Which of these functions can currently be bought from and sold by farmers? Which can potentially be bought from and sold by farmers? Which cannot?
- What trade-offs does our current food system make among these functions? Can all functions be improved? Or do some priorities have to be sacrificed?
- How can labor conditions be improved in agriculture?
What is the potential role for government in addressing food systems challenges?


Tentative: Guest lecture.

Required Readings
TBA


Additional Readings


Macdonald and Hayenga. “Concentration, mergers and antitrust policy.” [https://www.afpc.tamu.edu/pubs/7/263/macdonald.pdf](https://www.afpc.tamu.edu/pubs/7/263/macdonald.pdf)


Nov 23 What role can consumers play in bringing about food systems change?

Alternative Avenues for Change II: Consumer Movements


Lang and Heasman Ch 7


Additional Readings


**Reading Questions**

- What are consumer preferences? Where do they come from and how do they relate to ‘value’? How do they shape the food system?
- What is certification, how does it work to improve social and environmental conditions within the food system? What assumptions is this model of change based on?
- What possibilities does certification open up for consumers to express political value through their purchases? What are the limits to this kind of politics?
30 Nov What role can the market, private entrepreneurship, and innovation play in solving food systems challenges?

Alternative Avenues for Change III: the Private Sector

Required Readings


Lang and Heasman Ch 6

Additional Readings


Reading Question

- These authors differ in their conclusions about the role of private corporations in creating social value and social change. How does each view the relationship between: business and government, economic value and social value, and the market and politics?
7 Dec Can re-localizing economic activity solve food systems challenges?

Alternative Avenues for Change IV: communitarian approaches

Required Readings


Additional Readings

Campbell 1997 “Community-controlled economic development as a strategic vision for the sustainable agriculture movement.” *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*.


Reading questions

- How transformative (effectively different than the current food systems) are the local ownership and control models discussed in the readings?
- Is it possible to change the food system as a whole starting from these local-level initiatives?
14 Dec What role can social movements and contentious politics play in bringing about food systems change?

Alternative Avenues for Change V: Food Movements

Required Readings

Alkon and Mares 2012. “Food Sovereignty in US food Movements: Radical visions and neoliberal constraints” Agriculture and Human Values

Allen et al. 2003 “Shifting plates in the agrifood landscape: the tecntonics of alternative agrifood initiatives in California” Journal of Rural Studies


Myers and Sbicca 2015. “Bridging good food and good jobs: from secession to confrontation within alternative food movement politics” Geoforum

Additional Readings

Brent et al. 2015 “Contextualising food sovereignty: the politics of convergence among movements in the USA” Third World Quarterly


Lang and Heasman Ch. 8


Reading Questions
  - What is food politics? How consistent or challenging is it with the current food system?
  - How consistent are the tactics and strategies of food system reformers and activists with the discourses they espouse?
  - How radical a change is needed in order to address the set of problems that have arisen through the history of the U.S. system? What kind of politics and political action is needed to bring about this change?

Assignment: final essay due December 18 11:59pm