

Agriculture, Farmers, Food: Foundational Matters

PLSC 405
ANTH 389
EVST 389

Instructor: James C. Scott

Meetings: Thursdays 3:30 – 5:20

Location: Room 203, William L. Harkness Hall (WLH), 100 Wall Street

This seminar is designed to be a brief but foundational introduction to the study of agriculture, food, and farming: my idea of an intellectual ‘boot camp’ for those who want the background knowledge for further work along more specialized lines.

For most of mankind’s history, subsistence activities have been at the center of human work, social life, and artistic imagination. Since the Neolithic revolution and until very recently, most of the world’s population has scratched the earth for a living and much of the rest has been occupied in grinding or otherwise processing it, transporting it, and cooking it. Agriculture has been, then, the key activity in the transformation of the world’s landscape, in the lived experience of work, in the formation of classes, in the organization of social bondage, and in the creation of imagery and in the social imagination. Peasants and farmers are the most numerous class in world history; hence, to study human welfare, material life, rebellions, and aspirations is necessarily to study also the land, those who till it, and what they produce.

The literature falling under this rubric is vast and spans many disciplines. Despairing of any attempt to be comprehensive, we are guided three pedagogical choices: 1) to introduce as many of the major themes as possible in a single semester, 2) to select ‘classic’ works that either attempt an historically deep and sweeping analysis of a theme or that represent an original analysis of a topic that breaks new ground (pun intended), and 3) to emphasize exemplary works of interdisciplinary scholarship. It’s the closest thing to an introduction to basic literature in agrarian studies that I can devise.

Since there are so many works we might profitably read, the class will, occasionally, be divided into two groups, each reading one of two works that are implicitly or explicitly in dialogue with each other. Each group will produce a brief summary of the work they are reading for the other group to serve as a basis for discussion. Each seminar meeting will begin or end with a half hour summary, by the instructor or by an invited guest, of the main intellectual issues raised by the readings.

You will be expected to write three brief responses to the texts we will be reading and to take responsibility for helping to organize discussions. You are expected to write a research paper. The topic should be negotiated beforehand with the instructor.

September 4

Week 1

Introduction: The Origins of Agriculture

September 11

Week 2

The Life of the Soil

Reading:

Daniel Hillel. 1992. *Out of the Earth: Civilization and the Life of the Soil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

September 18

Week 3

Crops—New World to Old; Old World to New

Readings:

James McCann. 2005. *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500-2000*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

John Sourli. 2005. *Banana Cultures*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

September 25

Week 4

Long Durée Ecological Analysis

Readings:

Mark Elvin. 2004. *Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

William Cronon. 1991. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton.

October 2

Week 5

Food Supply and Politics

Readings:

E.P. Thompson. 1950. "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." *Past and Present* 50:76-136.

Louise A. Tilly. 1971. "The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2.1:23-57.

Charles Tilly. 1975. "The Politics of Urban Food Supply in Early Modern Europe (approximate title)." In *The Formation of Nation States in Western Europe*, edited by Charles Tilly, pp. 380-455. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Barbara Alpern Engel. 1997. "Not by Bread Alone: Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I." *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (4): 696-721.

October 9

Week 6

Peasant Movements and Revolution

Readings:

John Womack. 1970. *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. New York: Knopf
Orlando Figes. 1989. *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press.

October 16

Week 7

Testimony: Oral History

Readings:

Theodore Rosengarten. 1974. *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*. New York: Random House.

Charles van Onselen 1996. *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Share-cropper, 1894-1984*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Oscar Lewis 1964. *Pedro Martinez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family*. New York: Vintage.

October 23

Week 8

Representations of the Rural

Readings:

Raymond Williams. 1975. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Christiana Payne. 1993. *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890*, pp. 1-66, including illustrations between pp. 52 and 54. New Haven: Yale University Press.

M. M. Manring. 1998. *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, selections. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

October 30
Press.

ly, pp. 380-455. Princeton: Princeton University

Week 9

Agricultural Commodity Chain Analysis

General Readings:

Jason Clay. 2004. *World Agriculture and the Environment: A Commodity-by-Commodity Guide to Impacts and Practices*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press. Pp. 1-65, and the sections on soybeans, 173-202; wood pulp, 305-31; corn, 407-29; beef, 461-90; shrimp, 491-512; and conclusions, 542-52.

Jennifer Baer. Forthcoming. "Global Commodity Chains: Genealogy and Review. In *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*, edited by Jennifer Baer. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Richard P. Tucker. 2000. *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Case Studies:

Sidney W. Mintz. 1995. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin.

E. Melanie Du Puis. 2002. *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink*. New York: New York University Press.

November 6

Week 10

Class and Industrial Agriculture

Readings:

Arthur Stinchcombe. 1970. "Organized Dependency Relations and Social Stratification." In *The Logic of Social Hierarchies*, edited by Edward O. Laumann, et al. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Deborah Fitzgerald. 2003. *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

James Scott. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Selections. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Readings on the "green revolution" and "genetically modified organisms" to be added.

November 13

Week 11

Alternatives to Industrial Agriculture

Readings:

Robert Mc. Netting. 1993. *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture*, pp. 1-101, 260-334. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Sir Albert Howard. 1943. *An Agricultural Testament*, pp. 1-52, 181-224. London: Oxford University Press.

Julie Guthman. 2004. *Agrarian Dream: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

OECD *Organic Agriculture: Sustainability, Markets, and Policies*. 2003. Cambridge, MA: CABI Publications.

November 20

Week 12

Food and Consumption

Readings:

Richard Butsch, ed. 1990. *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption*, pp. 3-27, 28-44. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Carol, M. Counihan 1992. "Food Rules in the United States: Individualism, Control, Hierarchy." *Anthropological Quarterly* 65(2): 55-66.

Brillat-Savarin. 2004. *The Physiology of Taste*, selections. Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing.

The Slow Food Movement, Manifesto and selections from Carlo Petrini's (co-founder of the Slow Food Movement) writings.

Text to be provided. Pp. xxiii-63.

December 4

Week 13

Roundtable on Student Research

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November 13

Week 11

Alternatives to Industrial Agriculture