

## Rural Sociology/Sociology 650

Sociology of Agriculture

Spring Semester 2008

Tues/Thurs 1:00-2:15; 10 Ag Hall

**Instructor:**

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Office hours: Tues 2:15-3:30

*and by appointment*

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to the sociology of agriculture in advanced industrial-capitalist societies. Particular attention will be paid to the theoretical, historical, and empirical issues of agriculture in the United States, with additional discussion of the global dimension of the agrifood system and how these issues unfold in Mexico and other countries in the global south.

Graduate students enrolled in this course are expected to do additional readings and to participate in an 'extra reading' group for one hour every other week with Professor Harrison. Together, we will develop a reading list for this group during the first week of class. One or two students will be responsible for leading discussion during each of these meetings. Undergraduate students are welcome to join this group and can receive one extra credit for adequately participating on a regular basis; interested students should discuss this with me at the beginning of the semester.

### COURSE OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

Much more than tractors and seeds, agriculture is a key economic sector, a way of life, a source of open space, a tremendous manipulation of natural resources, the source of essential staples and sustenance, and a space in which we interrogate and negotiate our relationship with the natural world as well as with each other. Agriculture has been conceptualized as "the middle landscape": "that space, which is at once real and imaginary, between the city and the wilderness, wherein the agrarian and/or pastoral ideal resides, and where people live and work with nature" (Vos 2000: 246). Cutting through this image, however, remain a host of agrifood system problems that have become increasingly apparent in recent decades - including the economic vulnerability of family farmers, food safety crises, farm worker poverty, and air and water pollution from pesticides, fertilizers, and animal waste. These problems make clear the utmost importance of thoughtful, well-informed, and interdisciplinary analysis of the agrifood system, its dilemmas, and their potential solutions.

This course is a sociological exploration of agriculture from three distinct but interrelated vantage points: changes in the structure and dynamics of the agrifood system, shifting trends in academic analysis of agriculture, as well historical and current social movement responses to social and ecological problems in the agrifood system. As will become clear, what we call a 'sociology of agriculture' might more accurately be termed a 'sociology of agrifood systems', where the farm is but one (in some ways decreasingly significant) point in an elaborate network of production and consumption, of power and politics. The problems we will confront throughout this course are incredibly complex and daunting, defying simple, 'silver bullet' solutions. Students should be prepared to grapple, struggle, consider, and deliberate multiple and often conflicting perspectives about the causes of serious agrifood system problems, as well as equally varied (and inconclusive) debates about how these problems should be solved.

This course begins with an overview of major trends in US agrifood systems, from which point we will spend several weeks interrogating the primary causes of these major structural changes. The third part of the course will examine how these dynamics unfold in a global context. For the final and longest segment of

the course, we will explore the rise of sustainable agriculture in the US – as a research paradigm, a social movement, and as agricultural practice. Two recent monographs and a collection of foundational articles will serve as the basis for interrogating the struggles, accomplishments, and limitations of different efforts to address social and ecological problems in US agriculture and to drive it in a more sustainable direction.

We will spend our time together in this course working to understand and debate solutions to persistent and urgent agrifood system problems. Students should understand that I am more concerned with posing difficult questions (and showing why they matter) than with offering definitive answers. My primary goal is to help students generally develop their critical thinking skills and to be more compassionate and engaged citizens.

## REQUIRED READINGS

The following books are all REQUIRED for all students and can be purchased from the Rainbow Cooperative Bookstore:

Bell, Michael Mayerfeld. 2004. *Farming for Us All: Practical Agriculture and the Cultivation of Sustainability*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

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

Schlosser, Eric. 2002. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin.

Wright, Angus. 2005. *The Death of Ramon Gonzalez* (Revised Edition). Austin: University of Texas Press.

A reader of selected articles is also REQUIRED and will be available for purchase from The UW Tech Store, which is located at 1210 West Dayton Street (just east of Union South) and open from 7:45a.m. until 5:00p.m. It should cost approximately \$20.

A few other readings, some lecture materials, and other key information will be available as downloadable material or direct links to websites through Learn@UW:

<https://learnuw.wisc.edu/>

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. *Preparation/Attendance/Participation*. Preparation, attendance, and participation are absolutely mandatory in this course.
  - a. *Preparation*: I expect each student to come to class with the reading done on the day it is listed on the syllabus. Doing readings well means reading, taking notes, and re-reading. Please bring the reading materials and your notes with you to class and be prepared to ask questions or make comments that occurred to you while doing the readings. I expect you to actively engage with the readings in class, so preparation is essential.
  - b. *Attendance*: Each student will be allowed three absences from class without the need for official notes and without affecting the participation grade. Beyond that, an official

notification has to be produced. I recommend that you anticipate that you may need to be absent at some point in the semester; thus, do not squander your absences early in the semester unless necessary. In regards to religious observances and other anticipated absences: Please let me know at the beginning of the semester about any dates you will be absent from class for religious or other reasons. When you are absent, you are responsible for taking the initiative to find out what you missed. You should obtain notes from a fellow classmate and also ask me about updates, news, and clarifications.

- c. *Participation*: Although attending class is required, so is your active engagement with the course material. You need not always have something to say, but your consistent and informed participation in lecture and/or section is a course requirement.
2. *Reading Reflections*. Every week this semester (with the exception of the first week), you are required to write a reading reflection. These are due by 9:00am on Tuesdays. In each reading reflection, you must do all of the following:
- a. First, in one sentence of your own words, summarize the main argument of the first reading listed in the syllabus for that week. Then, in one or two additional sentences, state the primary supportive evidence offered to support the main argument. These readings you should address each week are as follows:
    - i. For response due 1/29: Schlosser (pp. 111-222)
    - ii. For response due 2/5: Hightower
    - iii. For response due 2/12: Heffernan
    - iv. For response due 2/19: Poppendieck
    - v. For response due 2/26: Wright (pp. 51-86, 140-187)
    - vi. For response due 3/4: Wright (pp. 286-355)
    - vii. For response due 3/11: Allen and Sachs
    - viii. For response due 3/25: Bell (pp. 91-200)
    - ix. For response due 4/1: Guthman (Chs. 1 & 2)
    - x. For response due 4/8: Guthman (Ch. 4)
    - xi. For response due 4/15: Kloppenburg et al.
    - xii. For response due 4/22: Harrison
    - xiii. For response due 4/29: Lyon
    - xiv. For response due 5/8: (to be announced; note the Thursday due date)
  - b. Then, discuss that reading in relation to recent course concepts and/or other readings, how various readings differ or overlap with each other, your critical evaluation of the evidence provided to back up the arguments, your own questions about the reading(s), how the readings affected you personally/emotionally, and/or comments or suggested discussion questions for class. I encourage you to reference specific passages or ideas in order to illustrate your comments.

You will receive 0, 5, or 10 points for each reading reflection, depending on the quality of your work, the degree to which you adhere to these two requirements, and how meaningfully you engage with the reading(s) -- You will not be judged on how well you follow what you think my point of view is. Reading reflections must be proofread, typed in 12-point font, and the equivalent of one double-spaced page (minimum). These should be submitted to the appropriate "dropbox" on Learn@UW. These are due by 9:00am on Tuesdays. Note that I will accept only one late reading reflection per student during the semester (up to one week late) -- I advise that you not squander this opportunity early in the semester unless absolutely necessary.

3. *Tests.* Two in-class tests will be given. The first test will take place on March 6 and will cover some but not all of the material from the first half of the course. The second test will take place on May 6 and will cover some but not all of the material from the second half of the course. There is no final exam for this course. Please note my philosophy on tests: These tests are useful for gauging your knowledge on key terms and course concepts. However, they will not cover all of the useful material or all of your worthwhile efforts in this class -- I will challenge you to engage with the more complex debates we study in this class through reading, writing, and active debate. (125 points each)
4. *Short Papers.* Two short papers will be assigned.
  - a. *Short Paper #1.* Due March 13. Drawing on and explicitly referencing any/all course material to date, prepare a thoughtfully composed and coherently organized paper (minimum 4 pp.) in response to the following questions: (150 points)
    - i. Describe the primary characteristics of the 'mainstream'/'conventional' agrifood system today. In what ways has it changed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
    - ii. How have sociologists of agriculture and other scholars explained these changes? List as many explanations as you can think of, and be sure to explain your logic.
    - iii. What do you consider to be the primary social and ecological problems associated with the 'mainstream' agrifood system? Why?
  - b. *Short Paper #2.* Due May 13. Drawing on and explicitly referencing any/all course material to date, prepare a thoughtfully composed, concise, and coherently organized paper (minimum 4 pp.) in response to the following questions: (150 points)
    - i. What is "sustainable agriculture"?
    - ii. To what extent do people agree on this concept, its definition, and its goals?
    - iii. Farmer organizations (like PFI), organic certification, local food networks, and fair trade, have been proposed in this course as means of pursuing various versions of 'sustainable agriculture'. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of each of these; be sure to discuss the various barriers to each.
    - iv. What other institutional innovations might be useful?
5. *News Analysis.*
  - a. Follow the newspaper coverage of agrifood system issues throughout the semester. You must scan the *New York Times* and one other newspaper of your choosing on a regular basis. Be sure to read through all of the paper sections (some of which are only published on certain days/week): national, local, business, and food. (I encourage you to use the hard copy version of each, but the online version is acceptable; both versions of the *NYT* are available through the UW library.)
  - b. *News Story Presentations.* Twice during the semester, at the beginning of class, you must present a particular news story to your classmates. Your tasks are to (a) *very briefly* summarize the main points of the story, and (b) critically interrogate the story based on course concepts and your own critical analysis. At least one of these presentations must take place on/before Spring Break. Extra points will be given to students who present well in advance of the deadline. (two presentations; 25 points each)
  - c. *Report.* Due May 1. Drawing on and explicitly referencing any/all course material to date, prepare a thoughtfully composed, concise, and coherently organized paper (minimum 2 pp.) in response to the following questions: How satisfied are you with the news coverage of agrifood issues in the newspapers you examined? How adequately did the newspapers

characterize conventional agrifood system problems? How adequately did the newspapers characterize various 'solutions'? Did you see any noticeable differences between the different newspapers, any changes over time, any glaring omissions (of particular topics and/or viewpoints), or other noteworthy trends in the coverage? Note that you are welcome to focus your discussion to a specific agrifood system issue if you prefer. (100 points)

## GRADES

Grades will be based on the following distribution, for a total of 1000 points:

60 points	Attendance
100 points	Preparation/Participation
140 points	Reading Reflections (14 x 10 points each)
125 points	Test #1 (March 6, in class)
125 points	Test #2 (May 6, in class)
150 points	Short paper #1 (due March 13)
150 points	News analysis (2 news comments due throughout semester; report due May 1)
150 points	Short paper #2 (due May 13)

## TEST POLICY

I expect that you will be able to take both of the tests on the dates indicated, since both will take place during the regularly scheduled class period. However, if you will be unable to take a regularly scheduled test, you must inform me before 9:00am of the day of the exam. Makeup tests will always be held within one week *after* the regularly scheduled test, will be held at my discretion, and may differ significantly from the regularly scheduled test.

If you have any disabilities that affect your test-taking, please meet with me within the first few weeks of class to discuss any necessary accommodations.

## ASSIGNMENTS: LATE POLICY

*Reading reflections:* I will only accept one late reading reflection per student per semester. Reading reflections are due by 9:00am every Tuesday into the appropriate "dropbox" in the Learn@UW site for this class. If you submit one late reading reflection, it is due within one week. See details above.

*Short Papers and News Analysis Report:* Please submit these papers on time. Although I will accept late submissions, I will subtract 10% per week late.

## PLAGIARISM

All work that you submit for this class must be your own work, and you are required to quote and cite all references properly. Although this mandate appears straightforward, I am well aware of how murky the task can be. Wherever you are unsure about quoting and citing, please come see me to figure out the best strategy. UW-Madison's College of Agriculture suggests that I present to you the following statement on plagiarism:

Plagiarism is a serious offense. All sources and assistance used in preparing your papers must be precisely and explicitly acknowledged. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please read the following information...

<http://www.wisc.edu/students/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html#points>

...or come talk with me. Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is not a defense. It is your responsibility to be sure. The web creates special risks. Cutting and pasting even a few words from a web page or paraphrasing material without a reference constitutes plagiarism. If you are not sure how to refer to something you find on the internet, you can always give the URL. It is generally better to quote than to paraphrase from material on the web, because in the absence of page numbers it can be hard to find passages that are paraphrased rather than quoted. For more information on writing and source citation, the following may be helpful:

[www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/Acknowledging\\_Sources.pdf](http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/Acknowledging_Sources.pdf).

## **SUGGESTIONS**

Doing well in this course will require active engagement and diligent study habits. I have several suggestions about practices that will help you stay afloat and engaged with the course:

1. Keep up with the readings, and do the assigned readings before the date on which they are due.
2. Take notes while you read. Afterwards, write a few sentences about the main point(s) of the piece. This will help jog your memory later as you prepare for exams. Also, jot down any questions you have about the readings or course material, and bring these to class. Use these notes to prepare your reading reflections.
3. Re-read. Reading course material a second time will be faster than the first and will undoubtedly help you understand and critically interrogate the material.
4. Make your reading reflections a productive (rather than tedious) exercise. Carefully summarize key arguments, note common themes between readings, relate readings to lecture material, etc.
5. Attend class. In class, be prepared to ask questions or offer comments about the readings, how they relate to lecture material, or current events.
6. Take notes throughout class. Do not expect that simply copying down the terms and diagrams I present on the board or screen to be sufficient.
7. When/if you miss class, get class notes from another student who you trust to be a good note-taker. This is your responsibility – I will not repeat lectures for students who miss class.
8. Check your email frequently for messages about the class.
9. Attend office hours. I am glad to meet with you outside of class. If you cannot attend the scheduled office hours, let me know and I will find another time to meet with you.

## SCHEDULE OF TOPICS, REQUIRED READINGS, AND EXAMS

### Part I: Introduction to Agrifood Systems: Major Changes and Their Implications

#### **January 22: Course Overview: What is Sociology of Agriculture?**

#### **January 24, 29, 31: Major Trends in Agrifood Systems**

January 24: *Fast Food Nation* (pp. 1-107)

January 29: *Fast Food Nation* (pp. 111-222)

January 31: *Fast Food Nation* (pp. 225-288)

### Part II: Underlying Drivers of Agrifood System Structure and Change: US Context

#### **February 5: The Land Grant University Complex: Research Priorities**

Hightower, Jim. 1973. *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman (pp. xvii-7, 21-64)  
(Learn@UW)

#### **February 7, 12: Consolidation and Concentration**

Heffernan, William. 1997. "Agro/Food System." In G.A. Gorham, ed., *Encyclopedia of Rural America*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, pp. 46-51. (Reader)

Pollan, Michael. 2002. "Power Steer." *New York Times Magazine*. March 31. (Learn@UW)

#### **February 14: Farm Labor Availability**

Pfeffer, Max J. 1983. "Social Origins of Three Systems of Farm Production in the US." *Rural Sociology* 48(4): 540-560. (Reader)

Bowden, Charles. 2006. "Exodus: Coyotes, Pollos, and the Promised Van." *Mother Jones* October: 36-51, 106. (Reader)

#### **February 19: Formal Agrifood Policy. Guest speaker: Jeanne Merrill, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (<http://www.michaelfieldsaginst.org/index.html>)**

Poppendieck, Janet. 2000. "Want Amid Plenty: From Hunger to Inequality." In Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick Buttel, eds., *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment*. New York: Monthly Review Press. (Reader)

Read up on the current Farm Bill debate by browsing through the website of the Sustainable Agricultural Coalition: [www.sustainableagriculturecoalition.org](http://www.sustainableagriculturecoalition.org)

Food First. 2006. "Twelve Myths About Hunger." Food First (Institute for Food and Development Policy) Backgrounder. Summer. Find at: <http://www.foodfirst.org/12myths>

Part III: Underlying Agrifood System Structure and Change: International Context

**February 21:** *The Death of Ramon Gonzalez* (pp. xi - 50)

**February 26:** *The Death of Ramon Gonzalez* (pp. 51-86, 140-187 [esp. note pp. 171-187])

**February 28:** *The Death of Ramon Gonzalez* (pp. 188-285)

**March 4:** *The Death of Ramon Gonzalez* (pp. 286-355)

**March 6: \*\*\*Test #1\*\*\***

Part IV: Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Food Movements

**March 11: What is 'Sustainable Agriculture'?**

Allen, Patricia, and Carolyn Sachs. 1993. "Sustainable Agriculture in the United States: Engagements, Silences, and Possibilities for Transformation." In P. Allen, ed., *Food for the Future: Conditions and Contradictions of Sustainability*. New York: John Wiley and Sons: 139-167. (Learn@UW)

Pollan, Michael. 2007. "Our Decrepit Food Factories: What Sustainability is Really About." *The New York Times Magazine* December 16: 25-28. (Learn@UW)

**March 13-27: 'Sustainable Ag' in the Midwest: A Case Study of The Practical Farmers of Iowa**

March 13: *Farming for Us All* (pp. 1-87)

**\*\*Due on March 13: Short Paper #1\*\***

*(March 17-20: Spring Break)*

March 25: *Farming for Us All* (pp. 91-200)

March 27: *Farming for Us All* (pp. 201-250)

**April 1-10: 'Sustainable Ag' in California: A Case Study of Organic Agriculture**

April 1: *Agrarian Dreams* (Chs. 1 & 2)

April 3: *Agrarian Dreams* (Ch. 3)

April 8: *Agrarian Dreams* (Ch. 4)

April 10: *Agrarian Dreams* (Chs. 7 & 8)

Vos, Tim. 2000. "Visions of the Organic Landscape: Organic Farming and the Politics of Nature." *Agriculture and Human Values* 17: 245-256. (Reader)

**April 15, 17: Local Food Systems**

Kloppenburg, Jack, Jr., John Hendrickson, and George W. Stevenson. 1996. "Coming in to the Foodshed." *Agriculture and Human Values* 13(3): 33-42. (Reader)

Born, Branden, and Mark Purcell. 2006. "Avoiding the Local Trap: Scale and Food Systems in Planning Research." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 26: 195-207. (Reader)

**April 22, 24: Pesticide Activism**

Harrison, Jill. Forthcoming (in press) 2008. "Abandoned Bodies and Spaces of Sacrifice: Pesticide Drift Activism and the Neoliberalization of Environmental Politics in California." *Geoforum*. (Access through UW Library - EJournal Titles - Geoforum)

Moses, Marion. 1993. "Farm Workers and Pesticides," in Robert D. Bullard, ed., *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*. Boston: South End Press. (Reader)

**April 29: Fair Trade**

Lyon, Sarah. 2007. "Maya Coffee Farmers and Fair Trade: Assessing the Benefits and Limitations of Alternative Markets." *Culture & Agriculture* 29 (2): 100-112. (Reader)

Hendricks, Tyche. 2008. "Economic Aid to Give Mexicans, Central Americans Work at Home." *San Francisco Chronicle*. January 7. (Learn@UW)

**May 1: Farm Labor Organizing and Immigration Politics**

Greenhouse, Steven. 2007. "Tomato Pickers' Wages Fight Faces Obstacles." *The New York Times*. December 24. (Learn@UW)

Browse through the website of the Coalition of Immokolee Workers: <http://www.ciw-online.org/>

Kotlowitz, Alex. 2007. "Our Town." *New York Times Magazine*. August 5. (Learn@UW)

Moser, Bob. 2006. "White Heat." *The Nation*. August 28/Sept 4. (Reader)

**\*\*Due on 5/1: News Analysis Report\*\***

**May 6: Test #2**

**May 8: Wrap-Up: Putting Knowledge into Action: Panel session with several young Madison-area agrifood entrepreneurs, activists, and other critical thinkers.**

**\*\*Due on 5/13: Short Paper #2\*\***