Philip H. Howard

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CSUS 855
The Political Ecology of Food
Fall 2016
blended classroom (2 hours) and online (1 hour) format
3.0 credit hours
Mondays, 12:40 to 2:30pm, 306 Natural Resources

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Brief Description Interactions between food, society and the environment. Ecological impacts and sociopolitical power in international and domestic contexts. Course Description This interdisciplinary course will apply political ecology (critical political economy, with attention to environmental changes) to specific foods and food systems. We will explore food production, consumption, and the links in between in the United States, as well as in global/international contexts. We will also apply theories and methods from political ecology to our own specific research interests. Doing so will require understanding the diversity of approaches encompassed by the broad field of political ecology, as well as directly engaging in the difficult task of bridging the social and natural sciences. Issues that will receive particular attention include technologies, scale, development strategies, labor issues, knowledge, standards and globalization. Learning Objectives

- Develop a scholarly capacity for analyzing the interactions between food, society and the environment, drawing on disciplines including anthropology, biology, development studies, ecology, economics, geography, history, political science and sociology.
- Develop a better understanding of how to synthesize political economic and ecological frameworks through case studies of food systems.
- Critically examine key themes in food research, with a focus on ecological sustainability, political participation and social inequalities.

Course Approach This course is organized as a small seminar with a commitment to developing collaborative learning among all who participate.

Course Prerequisites Graduate standing or permission from instructor. CSUS 811 (Community, Food and Agriculture: A Survey) is recommended, but not required.

Course Assignments and Evaluation Assignments (100 points each) include:

1. required readings and participation in class discussions
2. critical review of a scholarly book related to the political ecology of food
3. weekly online reflections applying the readings and class discussion from the previous week, and final self-evaluation
4. group project that critically applies political ecology to a food issue in Michigan
Weekly readings - you are expected to come to class prepared to answer the following questions about the weekly readings:

1. what did you agree/disagree with the most? OR what did you find most useful
2. what did the readings potentially leave out?
3a. what question(s) did the readings raise? 3b. what were you able to uncover about this question? (This will require that you seek out and read at least one additional article or chapter in an effort to answer your question. It's OK if you're not able to answer the question, just share what you learned in the process.)

Online Component
Each week (beginning in week 2) you will relate concepts from the previous class (readings and discussion) to your daily life and/or current events in an essay of approximately 500 words. For example, you might a) discuss how your food consumption behaviors have changed as a result of learning about the labor practices on tea plantations, b) compare and contrast policies developed for leafy greens in the United States to other food products, such as processed beef, c) describe how you might incorporate political ecology concepts in your thesis or dissertation research, or d) numerous other possibilities of your choosing. The intention is not require a significant amount of additional research, but to stimulate retrieval of the previous week’s content, encourage memory formation, and reinforce connections to other subjects (see Brown et al. 2014, Make It Stick, for more on the cognitive research supporting these outcomes). You will also be asked to read the reflections of other students, and brief responses are welcome (but not required).

Group Project
Peer groups will also engage in research in Michigan communities to apply concepts of political ecology. Each group will investigate a specific food or food system, the results of which will be made publicly available. There are a number of possibilities, but one example from a previous class involved conducting an inventory of all wine brands and varieties at 20 different retailers (n=3,600), tracing the ownership of all of these varieties (approximately 1,000 firms), creating an information graphic of these relationships using Gephi software, and analyzing ownership diversity available to consumers at different types of retailers (for more detail see https://www.msu.edu/~howardp/wine.html). Similar methods could be applied to other foods, or different questions could be explored (through subjects such as food trucks, community supported agriculture farms, cottage food laws, heritage pork producers, seed libraries, retail cooperatives, Naturally Grown certification, etc.).

Grading scale for the course (by percentage of the 400 points obtained): 94 to 100% - 4.0 87 to 93% - 3.5 80 to 86% - 3.0 75 to 79% - 2.5 70 to 74% - 2.0

Required Texts

Recommended Text (recommended to read before first class)
Additional readings as assigned (see below).  **Schedule**

**PART 1: INTRODUCTION**

Week 1 (8/31) – Class introductions, formation of peer groups

Week 2 (9/12) – The Political Ecology of Food

Week 3 (9/19) – Agroecology Part 1
- Vandermeer, The Ecology of Agroecosystems, Chapters 1–4

Week 4 (9/26) – Agroecology Part 2
- Vandermeer, The Ecology of Agroecosystems, Chapters 5–8

**Part 2: U.S. CASE STUDIES**

Week 5 (10/3) – Scale

Week 6 (10/10) – Commodity Chains
- Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World

Week 7 (10/17) – Technologies

Week 8 (10/24) – Critical Book Reviews due
- In-class presentations
Part 3 INTERNATIONAL/GLOBAL CASE STUDIES

Week 9 (10/31) – Development

Week 10 (11/7) – Pesticides
- Galt, Food Systems in an Unequal World

Week 11 (11/14) – Standards

Week 12 (11/28) – Globalization; draft group project due

Final Exam (12/15)
Group Project/Presentations, and final self-evaluation due

Supplemental Readings
Books that may be considered for the critical review assignment may include (but are not limited to):
- Fischer, E. F., & Benson, P. B. 2006. Broccoli and desire: Global connections and Maya struggles in postwar