Department of Community Sustainability

CSUS 463 – Food Fight: Politics of Food

Spring 2020
Monday and Wednesday, 12:40 – 2:00 pm
306 Natural Resources
Date of Final Exam: Monday, April 27, 2020, 12:45 - 2:45pm

Part 1: Course Information

Instructor: Wynne Wright, Ph.D.
Office: 330B Natural Resources
Phone: 517-884-1372
Email: wrigh325@msu.edu
Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 2-3:00 pm & by appointment

Course Description

Food has become politicized in ways we never dreamed and as our cultural perceptions of risk change, the result is often ‘food fights’ – battles over what we eat, when we eat, and how. Whether it is politically conscious consumers, social movements, or policy-makers, understanding the socio-political climate and motivations for agri-food change is crucial for sustainability. This class will examine everyday forms of power, domination and resistance, in the food system, the symbolic power of food, as well as food and agriculture policy-making.

Our primary goal in this class will be to identify and analyze the ways that power – broadly defined as the ability to influence – shapes our food system. We begin with the premise that the production, distribution, retailing, and consumption of food involves power among different groups with divergent goals. Toward that end, we will focus on learning about how various groups seek to construct food as a problem and/or opportunity and how they attempt to influence culture and statecraft (i.e., policy-making), thus influencing what we eat. This means that even as we discuss a particular food issue as a problem (e.g., nutrition, diet, school lunch, hunger, activism, labeling, organic, markets, etc.) we will also work to understand how certain agrifood issues become political problems, in other words, we will examine the process of politicizing. This will allow us to explore how food problems gain our attention, and how people, policymakers, media and other institutions and social groups respond to food problems.
Official Course Description

Social power and its influence in US agrifood system. Structural and cultural issues related to politics of food consumption, production, labor, processing, retail, techno-science, policy, resistance movements.

Objective and Course Approach

The objectives in this course are to:

1. Understand the power dynamics of food in the US.
2. Explore complex relationships between food and policy
3. Understand how power as being used as a median to shape our consumption practices
4. Build an understanding of academic research and scholarship in food politics.

We will rely upon a combination of methods to study food, agriculture, culture, and power in this course. I will frequently give ‘mini-lectures’ to clarify concepts and theories, but we will also rely heavily on discussion. I adhere to the school of thought that you get out of class what you put in it. Therefore, I hope to design a safe and rewarding learning environment, but my primary goal is to help you think analytically about food. That includes peeling back the layers of hidden social and political relations and meanings to fully understand what we eat and why. From time to time we will have guest speakers, field trips, and participate in document analysis to help us achieve this objective. Keep in mind that your personal encounters with food (and people) may not align with the empirical evidence that we discuss in class. Just because you(we) eat, this does not make us experts on food. This does not mean your insights are not valuable. Before you respond, ask yourself why a certain condition may be the case, how might your experience differ from others, why or what conditions might have given rise to set you and your experience apart from the empirical evidence? Openness and curiosity will help create a dynamic learning environment.

Required and Recommended Readings

All required readings are available in the following books and via a course Schoology website. A list of recommended readings will also be provided that I strongly urge you to try to read.

Required:

- Select Articles on-line via Schoology
Part 2: Course Evaluation

Evaluation for this course will be determined on the following criteria. Each of the criteria is more fully elaborated upon below.

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<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Value (each)</th>
<th>Total Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance/Participation</td>
<td>2 pts</td>
<td>60 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food &amp; Meaning</td>
<td>20 pts</td>
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<td>Short Assignment 1</td>
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<td>Short Assignment 3</td>
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I. Attendance/Participation

All students are expected to regularly attend class, be on time, to complete the assigned readings PRIOR to each class meeting, and to participate in class discussions. This means being prepared, mindfully engaging with the material, engaging in respectful dialogue with your peers and the instructor, sharing your thoughts/questions in class, and volunteering constructive answers/comments to others’ questions. Please do not use laptops during interactive class sessions (unless you are accessing an article), no cell phone usage will be permitted and no recording of class without my permission. Your attendance and engagement will make or break your experience in this course. Students who must miss class due to an excused absence must see me, with their excused absence, as early as possible. If you know you will need to miss in advance, please let me know as soon as possible. You are responsible for making up missed work. Only unexcused absences will impede your grade. For each class missed pass three, five percent of your total grade will be deducted.

A Pedagogical Note. Please review materials on the course Schoology site. Here you will find the syllabus, some of the course readings, and miscellaneous materials developed to help you excel at the assignments. Note that there is a reading guideline sheet that will be useful in helping you learn to read critically social science scholarship. Use this handout as a tool to complete each assignment. We will review how to set up a Schoology account on day one.

Assignments

Everyone must complete the “Food and Meaning” exercise (below) and the final exam. You are also required to complete 3 of the 5 short assignments.

Food and Meaning

What does food mean to you? Reflect on the place food has played in your life. Is there a particular food or custom that is very personal to you? Is there an experience or moment that food shaped your biography? It is a good idea to speak to family members to help resurrect memories about food and the attachment others might share with you on this issue. What do this/these memories have to do with your everyday eating, or special occasion eating? Who played a role in shaping this memory? How would you feel if your enjoyment of this food (or food practice, e.g. Sunday lunch with the family, canning tomatoes in August, etc) where threatened? What emotion do you most associate with this food or practice? What power does it hold over you (or what need does it fill in you)? Write a 3-4 page paper (double-spaced) in response to the questions above. Be prepared to share in class. DUE: Jan 15
Short Assignments

You will complete 3 of the following 5 assignments. Each should be 3-4 pages long (typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins).

- Food Blogs ... DUE: Feb. 5
- Food and Statecraft ... DUE: Feb. 19
- Food Politics on T.V. ... DUE: March 18
- Food Politics Abroad ... DUE: April 1
- Food, Friends and Family ... DUE: April 13

I. Food Blogs

Students must examine two different food-related blogs during the semester (NOTE: for the purposes of this course, food related websites which change regularly and frequently will be considered blogs, e.g., epicurious.com, seriouseats.com, chow.com) and prepare a paper about the contents, focusing on such questions as:

- Who writes the blog?
- What claims are being made?
- What is the purpose of the blog?
- Who is the audience?
- Who sponsors the blog? Does the sponsorship affect the content/point of view/claims?
- Summarize the content of the blog - does it have a specialization/point of view/agenda?
- What is ‘good’ food, according to the blog, and why?
- Does the blog engage in ‘food politics’? If so, in what ways?
- Is the blog trustworthy? Would you recommend it to a foodie friend, or someone just beginning to figure out what to eat?

You are free to choose whatever blogs you wish. They need not be American, and they can certainly focus on food matters of particular racial, religious, ethnic, national groups.

Check with me if you are not sure. DUE: Feb. 5

II. Food & Statecraft

Access the USDA website (www.usda.gov) and review the content. What types of food issues are raised on the website? What type of reports did the administration provide? What is your assessment of the quality of the reports? Do they have a political context? If so, what is political about the content and reports? Does the report confront this tension or gloss over it? Does this improve or harm citizens understanding of agriculture and food? Why? DUE: Feb. 19
III. Food Politics on T.V.

Find a recent food advertisement on Television or on-line and analyze its content. Describe the ad. What are they trying to persuade you to do in the ad? What frames are they using to evoke emotion/to appeal to you? What values are either evident or implied? How would you assess its accuracy? Do you think it is effective? Why? DUE: March 18

IV. Food Politics Abroad

Choose a country other than the U.S. and investigate the nature of its food politics. Describe the conflict? Who is involved? Where does the power lie? What is at stake economically, socially and culturally with various outcomes? What role does the state (federal government) play in this conflict? How much control does the government have over the outcome? This case select must be a conflict in process – not one that has been resolved. DUE: April 1

V. Food, Friends and Family Interviews

Interview several friends or family members, asking them about their food preferences – why they eat what they eat. You may need to help them by focusing on trending dietary patterns such as organic, vegetarian, vegan, GMOs, local/conventional. You can usually start this conversation by asking them where they buy their food – why do they shop there? Are they mindful of their eating patterns? Why do they eat what they eat? Do they mention political issues in their discussion of their food choices? How did your interviewees receive their information about their food choices? How large was the role of the news media as a source? How large was the role of science in their choices? DUE: April 13
Part 3: Course and University Policies

Punctuality
Please be sure to arrive at class on time. Come to see me as soon as possible if you anticipate that you will regularly be late. If you are consistently late, without having spoken to me, you will be counted absent. Email me if you know you will miss a class.

Cell Phones
Cell phone interruptions are detrimental to the learning of all. Turn them off or leave them at home.

Class List Serve
I will provide a list serve for this class to send out readings, announcements opportunities, etc. It is essential that students look at email daily to consult any messages I have posted.

Late Work
All written work that is not submitted on time will be penalized 10% for each day that it is late. Please save us both a lot of pain and suffering and turn your work in on time. Accommodations can be made for emergency situations, but I must be contacted in advance to grant an extension (e.g., in cases of illness or death in the family).

Grief Absence Request
All students requesting approved absence due to grief must complete the Grief Absence Request Form found on the RO home page (https://reg.msu.edu/) under ‘Student Services - Grief Absence Request Form’.

Disability Accommodations
Any student who feels that she/he may need accommodations based on a disability should see me during the first two weeks of the term so appropriate and timely arrangements can be made.

Academic Integrity
To cultivate a productive and safe academic environment, we must all agree to practice academic integrity. I assume that you understand this means - conducting your own work without the influence of others via cheating or plagiarism. If you are not clear how to reference the work of others develop these skills immediately. I will uphold this practice and I expect all
enrollees to do likewise. If not, I will abide by university policy and record failing grades for any infraction as well as report this to the proper university authority. For more information, see MSU Regulations, Ordinances and Policies Regarding Academic Honesty and Integrity at: https://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/academic-integrity/. MSU policy on plagiarism can be retrieved at: https://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/academicintegrity/plagiarism-policy.html.
Tentative Topics

Part 1. Food and Culture

Week 1

Monday 1/6/20 - Introduction and Overview

Today we introduce the subject of the class - What are food fights?

Recommended:
- Video: Eating anxiety: The perils of food politics and policy making
  - Chad Lavin - https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/51577

Wednesday 1/8/20 - Food and Meaning

Today we think about what food means to us.


Recommended:

Week 2

Monday 1/13/20 - Food, culture, and identity

Today we examine the power food can have over the individual.

• de Silva, “In Memory’s Kitchen: A Legacy From the Women of Terezin,” Forward and Ch. 1
• Film: The Meaning of Food: Last Meals

Wednesday 1/15/20

Today we explore what went into making of the food system we take for granted.


Recommended:


Part 2: Food and Power

Week 3

Monday 1/20/20 – Martin Luther King Day – no class meeting

Wednesday 1/22/20 What is food politics?

Today we consider how food is politicized.


Recommended:

• Lukes, Steven. 2005. Power; A Radical View. Ch. 1

Week 4

Monday 1/27/20 - Economic Power

Guest Speaker Dr. Phil Howard
Today we think about who owns what in the food system and why this matters.


Wednesday 1/29/20 - Constructing Food as a Social Problem

Today we explore how to think about food systems as a problem.


Recommended:


Part 3: Food, Agriculture, and Power in the U.S.

Week 5

Monday 2/3/20 - Food Wars

Today we examine the history of food wars; how we got to where we are.


Wednesday 2/5/20 - Food Wars


Week 6

Monday 2/10/20 - The Role of Governments in Food & Agriculture: Policy Making

Today we explore the role of government in our eating practices.

• Effland, Anne. 2000. “U.S. Farm Policy: The First 200 Years”
• National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition blog, 2014 Farm Bill Drill Down: The Bill by the Numbers (Links to an external site.)
• Video: Roni Neff (2014), “US Farm Bill History” Food and Farm Policy, from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health’s Center for a Livable Future:

Recommended:

• National Young Farmers Association blog, 2014 Farm Bill Passes Final Hurdle, Signed into Law (Links to an external site.)
• Rural Advancement Foundation International, The 2014 Farm Bill (Links to external site)

Wednesday 2/12/20 - The Politics of Farm Subsidies

• Paarlberg, Robert. Food Politics, Chapter 8.

Recommended:

• Video: Michael Pollan, The Farm Bill (Links to an external site.):

Week 7

Monday 2/17/20 - Nutrition and Health Policy

*Today we explore the role of the food industry in shaping our diets.*


Wednesday 2/19/20 - Nutrition and Health Policy


Week 8

Monday 2/24/20 - Nutrition and Health Policy

Wednesday 2/26/20 - Food Politics and Lent

Today we look at the role of Michigan culture and its ability to shape foodways.


Week 9  March 2-6 – Spring Break – no class meeting

Week 10

Monday 3/9/20 - Nutrition and Health Policy


Wednesday 3/11/20 - Nutrition and Health Policy


Week 11

Monday 3/16/20 - Food Politics in Michigan

Today we consider how politics shapes food policy in Michigan

Guest Speaker, Lori Yelton, MDARD

Wednesday 3/18/20 - Politics in the School Cafeteria

Today we examine how school lunch is shaped by politics at the national and local level.


Week 12

Monday 3/23/20

Recommended:


Wednesday 3/25/20 - Michigan School Lunch Politics

Guest Speaker: Colleen Matts

Today we explore school lunch politics in Michigan and efforts to change it.


Recommended:


Week 13

Monday 3/30/20 - French Food Politics

Today we explore how people battle over a classic French culinary symbol.


Wednesday 4/1/20 - Water Wars

Guest Lecturer: Garrett Sieloff

Today we explore the politics of water.


Recommended:

Week 14

Monday 4/6/20 - Alternative Food Politics

*Today we examine the political side of food labels.*


**Recommended:**


Wednesday 4/8/20 - Alternative Food Politics

*Today we consider the politics of food system change.*


**Recommended:**


Week 15

Monday 4/13/20

*Today we discuss the politics of the farmers’ market.*


Wednesday 4/15/20

Visit to Farm Market – class will meet at 4 pm for a visit to Allen Farmers’ Market at the Allen Neighborhood Center, 1611 E. Kalamazoo St., Lansing.
Week 16

Monday 4/20/20 - Food Activism

Today we examine how you can be a part of effective food system change.


Recommended:

- Lang, Tim and Michael Heasman. 2004. “Food democracy or food control” Pp 253-278

Wednesday 4/22/20 - Student Choice Day

What do you want to discuss? On this day we will explore a topic democratically decided upon by the class.

Final Exam: Monday, April 27, 12:45-2:45 p.m. (306 Natural Resources)