

## CULTURE & AGRICULTURE

Eating is – it must be – a repetitive activity. Most Americans today are fortunate to eat three meals a day and then some. Strange, then, that most Americans know little about how the food in the 80,000-plus meals they will consume in their lifetimes is produced. This is a new ignorance. For most of human history, most people knew *exactly* where, how, and by whom their food was grown (or hunted or gathered), if it had been processed by someone else before they obtained it and, more than likely, how the processing was done, and they knew how to preserve any temporary surpluses against lean times. Americans today do know where to go to buy food, and they are familiar with an astonishingly wide array of foods, more than most people in the past. Many know something about nutrition (especially since the government began requiring the food industry to provide certain kinds of nutritional information on packaging labels). And they know about a lot of different kinds of packages that the food they eat comes in, including how to recycle them. But relatively few Americans know very much about the agricultural activities that lie behind the food we all eat.

There are several reasons for contemporary Americans' ignorance of agriculture. A hundred years ago the majority of Americans lived on farms or in rural areas close to farms. Today 80 percent of us are urbanites. Although the amount of land being farmed in the United States is about what it was a century ago, the farms are larger and there are far fewer farmers, too few, in fact, for the U.S. Census Bureau to bother tracking farming as an occupation. Most Americans no longer have a relative or friend in farming and may not even know any farmers. As farms increased in size, the production process became more industrialized: large-scale specialized monocultures worked either with expensive equipment or low-paid workers. Another reason is that our food system has been nationalized and even globalized. No longer do we obtain our food from the region in which we live. It comes from distant places: potatoes from Idaho, rice from Texas, lettuce from Mexico, grapes from Chile. The farther away the source of the food, the less we know about the conditions under which it is produced. The specialization and long distances have led to more packaging and processing of our food before it reaches us, causing the primary production to recede even further into the background. Finally, we probably know less about the production of nearly *all* the things we use, not only food.

Should this ignorance about agriculture be a cause for concern? After all, our current food system is keeping the cost of our food low and giving us a wide range of food choices. Unfortunately, important concerns have been raised, along the lines of “means versus ends,” about the environmental, health, social, and even spiritual costs of our current food system. This course addresses these concerns from an historical and cross-cultural perspective. We will examine reasons for the beginning of agriculture, the nature of agricultural systems in small-scale societies, the impact of capitalism on agriculture, the nature of the global food system, and possibilities for developing a more

sustainable form of agriculture. Throughout we will address not only agriculture as an adaptive (and sometimes maladaptive) activity but its relationship to other aspects of culture (including economics, politics, values, and community) as well as its relationship to nature.

### Texts

Jack R. Harlan, *The Living Fields: Our Agricultural Heritage*. Cambridge U. Pr. (1998)  
B.L. Turner II and Stephen B. Brush (eds.), *Comparative Farming Systems*. The Guilford Press (1987) [[available on library reserve](#)]  
Arturo Warman, *Corn & Capitalism*. U. of North Carolina Pr. (2003)  
John Fraser Hart, *The Changing Scale of American Agriculture*. U. of Virginia Pr. (2003) [[available on library reserve](#)]  
Jules Pretty (ed.), *The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Agriculture*. Earthscan (2005)

### Course Requirements

Due 2/5: Quiz covering the beginnings of agriculture (15%)  
Due 3/13: 6-7 page paper on comparative agricultural systems (20%)  
Due 4/17: 6-7 page paper due on factors shaping modern American agriculture (20%)  
Due 5/15: Final Take-Home Examination (25%)  
Various times: two oral presentations (10%)  
Throughout semester: participation in discussion (10%)

### Syllabus

Date Assignment

#### I. Introduction

##### A. How did agriculture begin?

1/22 1. Harlan, Chap. 1  
1/24 2. Harlan, Chaps. 2 and 8 [NB!]

##### B. The Major “Hearths” of Domestication

1/29 1. The Near East: Harlan, Chapter 4  
2. Africa: Harlan, Chapter 5  
1/31 3. The Far East: Harlan, Chapter 6  
4. The Americas: Harlan, Chapter 7

## II. Comparative Farming Systems: Adaptation and Evolution

- 2/5            A. Approach and Overview
- \*\*QUIZ covering the beginnings of agriculture\*\***
- Turner and Brush, Part I, Chapters 1 and 2
- B. Paleotechnic and Consumption-Oriented Systems
- 2/7            T&B, Part II, Chapters 3 (Amazonia) and 4 (Yucatan)
- 2/12          T&B, Part II, Chapters 5 (Thailand) and 6 (Sierra Leone)
- C. Mixed Technic and Production Systems
- 2/14          T&B, Part III, Chapters 7 (Nepal) and 8 (Egypt)
- 2/19          T&B, Chapters 9 (Punjab) and 10 (Bangladesh)
- D. The Rise of Commodity Agriculture: the Case of Corn
- 2/21          Warman, Preface, Chapters 1-4
- 2/26          Warman, Chapters 5-8
- 2/28          Warman, Chapters 9-11
- 3 /4          Warman, Chapters 12-15
- E. Neotechnic and Commodity-Oriented Systems
- 3/6            T&B, Part IV, Chapters 11 (Great Plains) and 12 Sacramento Valley)
- 3/11          T&B, Part IV, Chapters 13 (Hungary) and 14 (France)
- 3/13          **\*\*MID-TERM EXAMINATION/PAPER\*\***
- 3/15-  
3/30          MID-SEMESTER RECESS

### III. Agriculture Today

#### A. Industrial Agriculture

4/1 John Fraser Hart, Chapters 1, 2, and 3

4/3 Hart, Chapters 4, 5, and 6

4/8 Hart, Chapters 7, 8, and 9

4/10 Hart, Chapters 10, 11, and 12

4/15 Hart, Chapters 13 and 14 and Conclusions

4/17 **\*\*PAPER DUE: what factors shape modern American agriculture?\***

#### B. The Critique: Sustainability and Agrarianism

4/22 Pretty, *Sustainable Agriculture*, Pt 1: Agrarian and Rural Perspectives

4/24 Pretty, Part 2, Agroecological Perspectives

4/29 Pretty, Part 3, Social Perspectives

5/1 Pretty, Part 4, Perspectives from Industrialized Countries

5/6 Pretty, Part 5, Perspectives from Developing Countries

### 5/8 IV. Conclusions

5/15 **\*\*FINAL TAKE-HOME EXAMINATION\*\***