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

Introduction: The Origins of Agriculture

September 11

The Life of the Soil

Reading:

September 18

Crops—New World to Old; Old World to New

Readings:


September 25

Long Durée Ecological Analysis

Readings:


October 2

Food Supply and Politics

Readings:


### October 9

**Peasant Movements and Revolution**

**Readings:**

### October 16

**Testimony: Oral History**

**Readings:**


### October 23

**Representations of the Rural**

**Readings:**


### October 30

**Agricultural Commodity Chain Analysis**
General Readings:


Case Studies:


November 6 
Week 10

Class and Industrial Agriculture

Readings:


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

November 13 
Week 11

Alternatives to Industrial Agriculture
Readings:


November 20

**Week 12**

**Food and Consumption**

Readings:


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**

d organisms” to be added.

November 13

**Week 11**

**Alternatives to Industrial Agriculture**