Sociology of Food

Course description

This course puts food -- something we all know a lot about -- into its social contexts. We'll explore how what we eat, and the way we eat it, express our social identities (as members of social classes, ethnic groups, religions, etc.); how preparing and consuming (or not consuming) food reproduce gender roles; how the economic system for producing and marketing food affects what (and how much) we eat; and how food is both an object of politics (e.g., a target for government regulation) and a subject of politics (e.g., a basis for social movements). Because collective identity, gender, business, and politics are all important topics in sociology, the course covers a lot of sociological ground.

Goals

Above all, you should learn how to think more sociologically about the foods we eat and the ways that we eat them, and you should be able to apply that perspective to foods and foodways that we have not discussed in class. Specific sociological perspectives include

-- the relationship between food and both individual and collective identities
-- the role of food and foodways in drawing and, sometimes, crossing social boundaries
-- the ways that food can serve as a medium for social conflicts
-- how broad economic forces like commodification, the rationalization of production, and globalization affect the foods available to us
-- the impact of prevailing food practices on the environment
-- the impact of prevailing food practices on workers in the food system
-- the varied ways in which food issues have become the focus for social activism and advocacy, such as the push for organic food, local food, slow food, just food, etc.
-- the challenges such activism and advocacy face, including the limits of consumer movements, the potential for corporate mainstreaming, and the concerted opposition of vested interests
-- how all of the above can interact, such as the obesity "epidemic" as a product of food economics but also a kind of social boundary-making and a "moral panic"

Requirements

Grades will be based on a cumulative Final (50%) and EITHER two in-class Midterms (25% each) or one in-class Midterm and one short paper (25% each). The exams will be "closed book," with essay questions (one each for the Midterms, two on the Final) and short identifications. For the Final (and only for the Final) I will post study questions (from which the Final questions will
be drawn) on TritonEd on Wednesday of week 10. I will also add 1/3 of a grade to students who regularly and constructively participate in class discussions.

Exams will be evaluated for the accuracy with which they summarize course material (lectures and relevant readings); the organization and clarity of the writing; and, most importantly, the initiative shown in going beyond readings and lectures to develop cogent arguments and examples of your own. That's how I know you've mastered course ideas: you can apply them to things and in ways that aren't covered in lectures and assigned readings.

For EITHER the first or the second Midterm, you may substitute a short (no more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12 pt font) paper on one of several topics (see below) from that unit of the course. This is an opportunity to pursue some of your own interests, taking some concept from the class (about "authenticity" in food marketing, for example, or the rationalization of food production, or the "high road" for labor in the food chain) and applying it to a particular case. If you want to write a paper in lieu of one of the Midterms, be sure to let me know by email and get an OK for your case study. You are welcome to change your mind and take the midterm instead of doing the optional paper, but no papers will be accepted AFTER the start time (11:00 am) for the corresponding midterm.

Papers, too, will be graded higher if they show a clear understanding of the concepts in the prompt; if they are well organized and well written; and if they marshal new evidence from your "field work" to "test" or challenge arguments from lecture or readings. In other words, don't just describe your findings; show how they illustrate, contest, and complicate general ideas from lectures and readings. Be sure to document your sources, including citations for any additional reading and URLs for any web material.

**Optional paper topics**

**Paper topics for Part One** of the course, in lieu of the first midterm. Pick one, and choose cases.

- Compare two supermarkets, one in a relatively high income area (e.g., La Jolla, Carmel Valley) and one in a relatively low income area (e.g., City Heights, Logan Heights, Encanto) in TWO ways. First, compare prices on 5 identical products. Second, compare the marketing displays in the fruit and vegetable and the bakery sections, using Freedman and Jurafsky's comparison of potato chips as a starting point.
- Collect samples of ads for the same food product that foreground a man vs. a woman (at least three ads of each type). Explain how they differ, such as in how the food is portrayed, what the man or woman is doing with the food, how the man or women is depicted in relation to other people, etc.
- Visit two restaurants, one representing an Americanized ethnic food (such as Panda Express, Taco Bell) and one that you can argue is a more "authentic" representative of that ethnic group and cuisine. Show how they differ in menus, food presentation, and food service.
- Find the official tourist website for 3 countries and show how they use a food or dish to signify what makes their country special. (Note that simple claims that their food is delicious are not relevant here.) Then "check" their claims by researching the history of those three foods.
Paper topics for Part Two of the course, in lieu of the second midterm. Pick one, and choose cases.

-- Find a food that has a list of at least 5 ingredients that fail the Pollan test, i.e., that would not be recognized as "food" by your great grand parents (the most common are the names of chemicals). For each of these 5, track down what they are, what they do (e.g., preserve, soften, bind, color, texture) and where they are (mostly) made.

-- Compare the ingredients, packaging, and marketing of the same product by a single company in at least three different countries. (An example from class that you should NOT use is potato chips.) How is the product customized for each national setting? (Pointing out that the packages use the country's main language won't get you very far.)

-- Find 2 examples of a food seller -- the manufacturer of a food, a restaurant, a food market -- that includes in its advertising the claim that it treats its workers well (such as, in wages, in benefits, or in working conditions). Then find out why: what distinguishes these enterprises from the vast majority that do not make such claims? For example, is there something distinctive about the nature of the product? The character of the owners? The intended market? The audiences for the advertisement?

-- Select some food product available in two contrasting forms, such as locally produced or not, conventional or organic, made by a big company or a small one, "whole" or ready to eat, etc. Examples include whole vs. presliced apples, bulk whole bean vs. canned ground coffee, grass-fed vs. conventional beef, a local microbrewery beer vs. Budweiser, and farmers' market salsa vs. Ortega's. Come up with an example of your own and then compare the two in terms of their production and distribution (for example, the character of the commodity chain, the distribution system and outlets, the ways in which the producer relates to the consumer, etc.).

You are welcome to come to office hours and discuss these further (if you just want an "OK" for your plans, email is fine).

Readings.

All the readings are available through TritonEd in the "Readings" folder. They should appear in the order listed below.

Academic honesty.

You should be familiar with UCSD's policies on academic integrity (http://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu/faq/index.html). The basic point is that you should never present someone else's words or ideas as if they were your own. If you have any questions about how these policies and principles apply to this course, please ask me.

Electronic devices in class.
If you use a laptop or tablet in class, please do so in one of the back 2-3 rows of the classroom so as not to distract other students. And please be sure your cell phone is silenced during class. I don't ban these devices entirely because from time to time it is helpful to look up bits of information to complement or clarify class discussions.

**Email.**

Please include the course number (137) in emails to me. I will try to respond within 24 hours, but emails are suitable only for very short questions and answers. For anything more, let's talk during office hours. If you can't make my office hours, we can arrange another time to meet.

**Schedule.**

Daily class powerpoints are available on TritonEd shortly after class.

**Part One: Food and Social Identities**

**Sept. 27:** Introduction to course

**Sept. 30, Oct. 2:** What to eat, and with whom? Food, identity, and social boundaries

R. Fox, “Food and Eating.” This is an anthropological perspective (it even takes a brief swipe at sociologists) but touches on many of the themes of the first third of the course.

T. Chee-Beng, "Commensality and the Organization of Social Relations"

**Oct. 4, 7:** Food and social class

P. Freedman, "Medieval and Modern Banquets"

J. Johnston and S. Baumann, *Foodies*, Introduction (pp. 1-30)

J. Freedman and D. Jurafsky, "Authenticity in America: Class Distinctions in Potato Chip Advertising"

**Oct. 9, 11:** "Ethnic" food in the U.S.

H. Levenstein, "The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930"


D. Li, "Here's What Chinese Takeout Menus Can Teach Us about Immigration"
S. Lu and G. Fine, "The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity"

**Oct. 14, 16:** National cuisines

A. Appadurai, "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India"

J. Siskind, "The Invention of Thanksgiving"

C. Shields-Argeles, "Food Identity in France and the United States"

**Oct. 18:** Gendered food and foodways

K. Cairns, J. Johnston, and S. Bauman, "Caring About Food: Doing Gender in the Foodie Kitchen"

E. Contois, "'Lose Like a Man': Gender and the Constraints of Self-Making in Weight Watchers Online"

**Oct. 21:** Leftovers and review

**Oct. 23:** FIRST MIDTERM EXAM or optional PAPER DUE DATE
If you opt for the paper, it is due by email no later than 11 am today.

**Part Two: The Business of Food**

**Oct. 25, 28:** Modern food production

W. Cronon, "Annihilating Space: Meat"

A. Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread*, pp. 51-72

**Oct. 30:** Rationalized and scientific food

M. Warner, *Pandora's Lunchbox*, 1-20

**Nov. 1:** Globalized food
J. Watson, "McDonald's in Hong Kong"

**Nov. 4:** The labor in food

J. Lo and A. Jacobson, "Human Rights from Field to Fork"


**Nov. 6:** Food and the environment; review

Paarlberg, *Food Politics*, pp. 116-136

**Nov. 8:** SECOND MIDTERM EXAM or optional PAPER DUE DATE
If you opt for the paper, it is due by email no later than 11 am today. Remember, you can only substitute a paper for ONE of the two midterm exams.

**Part Three: The Politics of Food**

**Nov. 13, 15** (Nov. 11 is a holiday): Food choice as personal politics; food advice


**Nov. 18:** Regulating food

M. Joseph and M. Nestle, "Food and Politics in the Modern Age: 1920–2012"

**Nov. 20, 22:** Fat Politics: Explaining, framing, and fighting obesity

Paarlberg, *Food Politics*, pp. 81-99
A. Saguy, *What's Wrong with Fat?* ch. 3

**Nov. 25-Dec. 4:** Food movements: Strategies for changing the food system

D. Clark, "The Raw and the Rotten: Punk Cuisine"
Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread*, ch. 6
Pollan, "The Food Movement, Rising"
Paarlberg, *Food Politics*, 166-183
Laudan, R. "A Plea for Culinary Modernism"
Documentary: ... (Nov. 27)

For a modest collection of web resources related to food activism, see http://pages.ucsd.edu/~jhaydu/FoodPolitics.html
Some of these bookmarks are dated.

Dec. 6: Leftovers and review

FINAL EXAM: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 11:30-2:30. Study questions will be available on TritonEd shortly after class on Wednesday, December 4.