GEOG 763 (Spring 2007) Seminar in Agricultural Geography

CONTEMPORARY AGRICULTURE AND RURAL CHANGE

Mondays, 12:30-3:15 pm. Saunders Hall 443B
Course website: http://webct.hawaii.edu

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Course Description:
Today we are witnessing a reconfiguration of forces that shape agriculture and rural land use. Place-based characteristics and social relationships intersect with increased flow of power, information, capital, as well as goods around the globe. In this class we will attempt to understand how these different forces are contested, and how they are expressed through local resource base to shape the contemporary agro-food system and rural landscape. These issues are examined in the context of international political economy, emphasizing the interaction of technological innovation, institutional change, and world-scale processes. It will analyze implications for rural economy, society, and environment.

The seminar will address three themes that are central to understanding contemporary agricultural geography:

1. Questions on the complexity of agricultural transformation
   a. Appropriation of rural processes by industrial capitalism
   b. Persistent local specificity within the broader social and economic structures
   c. Tenacity of peasant / household production systems within capitalist hegemony

2. Questions on the rising agri-food complexes
   a. Conditions of both production and consumption that shape agro-food landscapes.
   b. Alternative networks, embedding values and new geographies of food

3. Questions on the new rural relations
   a. Emergent complexity in the countryside
   b. Rural resource governance, policy and planning

Course Requirement
This is a reading seminar (up to 200 pages each week). Good discussions only happen if everybody does the reading.

There is no final term paper for this class. Instead, each seminar participant is required to submit:

• Three position papers (6-8 pages long)
• One book review, and
• Weekly one-page commentary.
Position papers are 6-8 pages long, addressing the questions based on your reading and interpretation of the literature. You are encouraged to bring in other sources such as other bodies of literature, case studies, or your own experience to enrich the discussion of the assigned topic. POSITION PAPERS ARE DUE 72 HOURS BEFORE CLASS DISCUSSION (i.e. by the preceding Friday, 1:30 pm). Please post your position paper online at the course website.

Students not writing a position paper for that week should write a one-page commentary on the presented paper(s) as feedback to the writers. Please bring the commentary to class and make enough copies for everybody. This is our way of building a collective analysis of a set of readings and issues. If there are more than one position paper in a week, commentary should still be confined to one page, and should reflect analysis of ALL papers and your own reading of the literature.

Required Books


A Course Reader will be available for purchase from Professional Image (University Square, 2633 S. King Street, next to Kokua Market in Mo`ili`ili).

Note: This class assumes a basic familiarity with the theories of political economy. For those who may need to brush up their understanding, you may want to check out this book:

WEEKLY OUTLINE (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

Week 1. Introduction, housekeeping

No class meeting on 1/8. First class meeting on **Friday, 1/12/07, 1:30 pm** in Saunders 443B
Movie screening: Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern

THE AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION

Week 2. 1/22/07. The domestication and transformation of nature by capitalism and science

Prior to Columbus ‘discovery’ of the Americas, there were a number of other seafaring explorers (e.g. Marco Polo, Cheng Ho, Ibn Batuta) who had made great inter-continental journeys. Moreover, numerous on-land caravans had gone through the silk route and brought exchanges of plants and animals between culture hearths in Asia and Africa. In what way did the Columbian Exchange differ from these earlier exchanges? To what extent did the development of capitalism in Europe shape (and be shaped by) agricultural development in the colonies?


THE AGRARIAN QUESTIONS

The term ‘agrarian question’ stems primarily from debates within the German Social Democratic Party in the late nineteenth century over political strategy with regard to the peasantry. It questions whether (and in what ways) agriculture – particularly peasant-based agriculture – is different from manufacturing industry. What are the reasons for peasant production and small farms – which do not hold any advantage with regard to economies of scale, capital accumulation or access to technology – to have persisted under capitalism? This question carried much political weight in nineteenth century Europe, and throughout the 20th century all around the world.
**Week 3. 1/29/07. Peasants, family farms and capitalist agriculture**

Are rural producers subsistence-oriented peasants or profit-maximizing capitalist farmers? Review the propositions by both Chayanov and Lenin, and explore their implications on how subsistence agrarian economies can transition (or not) into capitalist agriculture. To what extent do such ‘obstacles’ identified by Mann & Dickinson are hindering the expansion of capitalist agriculture? Is there such thing as a “moral” economy?


**Week 4. 2/5/07. Agriculture-led development**

Examining the Latin American “crisis” and the Asian “success”, discuss the roles of agriculture and rural development in the national economy. What are the structural challenges for an agriculture-led development strategy to benefit rural society?


**Week 5. 2/12/07. The labor question**

This week's discussion focuses on a question of what distinguishes agricultural labor from manufacturing labor. Continuing from the discussion of 2 weeks ago, what are the ways to recruit and mobilize (and discipline) labor in agriculture? What are the conditions for capitalist farms to be competitive to family farms?

COMPETING CLAIMS OVER PRODUCTION PROCESSES

Despite the 'organic' nature of food production, industrial capital has been able to appropriate growing segments of agro-food production. The last few decades saw a hunt for techno-centric solutions to (growing) societal and ecological problems, which has resulted in the deepening appropriation of agro-food production processes by 'life sciences' corporations.

**Week 6.  2/26/07.  Double crises and the technocratic solution**

Following the analysis by David Goodman, et al., the current structure of agro-food industry is a rational outcome that responds to capitalist contradictions in agro-food production. It results in both shortages and surpluses (as well as environmental destruction). With this understanding, what are the alternatives to the capitalist, techno-centric solutions?


**Week 7.  3/5/07.  Globalization, vertical integration, and contract farming**

What mechanisms have led to the increasing dominance of global markets, global production and global value? Explain how peasants, family farms and rural communities are reconfigured by the globalization of agro-food systems.


Week 8. 3/12/07. Biotechnology

Biotechnology in agriculture has generated much public anxiety in ways that were unprecedented. Discuss the pros and cons of agricultural biotechnologies. What distinguishes biotechnology from earlier technological applications in agriculture (such as in the case of the Green Revolution)?


Week 9. 3/19/07. New consumption politics

With the heightened awareness among consumers of what we eat, to what extent can consumption-driven politics become the basis of “alternative” agriculture? Discuss the contradictions that have been confronting the sustainable agriculture movement. What are the alternative visions, what are their challenges?


**Week 10. 4/2/07 Book review**


**THE NEW RURAL**

Uncertainties surrounding the future of agricultural production and the use of rural land, and the growing concern for the protection of the environment have brought rural issues to the attention of both scholars and policy makers. In these debates, the conventional distinctions between urban and rural places, and between production and consumption, are increasingly questioned. Rural phenomena are produced from the same range of social processes as other phenomena. A critical rural geography provides opportunities to incorporate nature and material reality into analysis of social processes.

**Week 11. 4/9/07. Re-positioning agriculture in rural discourse**

In many developed economies, agricultural production has continued to decline over the past 50 years. Yet it could still retain a disproportionate social and ideological significance in influencing national and regional policies. What are the reasons for this continuing farm support? What are the conditions that sustain the alliances among environmentalists, landowners, farmers, and politicians?


Week 12. 4/16/07. Consumption countryside

Why do people move to rural regions? What are the forces behind these movements? Comment on how these movements are promoted, contested, and negotiated by the various rural constituents, and the impacts of such movements.


Week 13. 4/23/07. Rural governance

To what extent does governing the new rural differ from governing other types of regions or societies? Who are the most influential in defining the future direction of rural change and what are the bases of those powers? With this understanding, can you comment on the current debate on rural land use in Hawai`i?


**Week 14. 4/30/07. Imagining the future**

Summing up the semester, our goal this week is to identify opportunities for action, while recognizing the intersection of contemporary global restructuring and local socio-political movements that surround agro-food systems and rural land use.