

EC235 Feeding the Planet, Eating the Earth: The Modern History and Future of our Food Systems

Seminar Leader: Omri Polatsek
Monday 14:00-17:00
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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

Our global food systems lie at the heart of today's planetary emergencies. When affected by climate change, economic shocks, and wars, they can have destabilizing consequences for human health, ecological systems, and planetary boundaries. In this course, we will explore the history, present, and future of our food systems. Drawing on history, sociology, anthropology, and critical agrarian studies, we examine the major transformation toward industrialized agriculture and the globalization of food systems from the 1870s to the present. Throughout the course, we will investigate diverse case studies from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America, exploring how these regions were integrated into the world-spanning networks, infrastructure, and markets that constitute our modern-day agro-food systems. We will examine the major junctions that shaped the transition from locally scaled subsistence economies to a planetary-scale, market-based food economy, examining the reciprocal relations between social-ecological, techno-scientific, and globalizing forces. By focusing on food production, circulation, and consumption, we explore the shifting dynamics of globalization, urban-rural relations, and the world political order, developing analytical skills to understand structural transitions in international trade and politics while remaining attentive to the unique trajectories of locally based case studies.

Requirements

- Active participation in person in class.
- Attendance according to Bard College regulations.
- Completion of all four assignments described below.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assignments, Assessment, and Grade Breakdown

Assignment 1 - Student Engagement (30%):

You are expected to participate in class in person. This means it will be important to complete the readings in advance and come prepared with specific examples from the text to discuss. In preparation for class, please consider the following questions: What is the author's intellectual background? What is the main argument? How does the author prove it? Please be respectful in your comments. Debates are encouraged, but they should be conducted considerably toward others in the class. If you have concerns about your grade, want to discuss expectations more thoroughly, or have issues with the nature of any comments, feel free to contact me or visit during office hours.

Assignment 2 - Midterm Essay (20%):

You will be asked to write a 2,000-word reflection essay on the material from the first half of the semester. I will provide a set of prompts to help guide your reflections, but you are also welcome to devise your own inquiry. It will not be necessary to incorporate outside sources.

Assignment 3 - Text Presentation in Class (20%):

You will be responsible for presenting a text in class. You may choose from the Optional Readings list provided for each session. You are also welcome to choose a text of your own that fits the weekly topic. Please consult me in advance if you choose a text yourself. In order to facilitate further discussion in class, please make sure that you include the following points in your presentation:

- Introduce the author and their intellectual background.
- The author's main argument. Please guide the class through the writer's argumentation process.
- Ensure that the central argument/concept is placed within the broader context of the course, possibly by drawing comparisons with other issues or approaches.
- Prepare two discussion questions.
- Present these points in a 15–20-minute presentation. If needed, a PowerPoint presentation may be used.

Assignment 4 - Research Project (30%):

Instead of a final exam, you will develop a food story. This will include identifying and researching a historical or contemporary food-system-related issue of your choosing. You will then build a research project on that issue. The final product can take many forms: a historical report, a policy brief, a visual artwork, a podcast, or another output of your own liking. This is a chance to be creative. We will take time in class to discuss this assignment in further detail. Each Project should have a written component of 2,500-3,500 words.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Schedule

Week	1
Date	August 31, 2026
Title	Course Introduction
Description	Introduction to course structure, syllabus, concepts assignments.
Key Readings	--
Optional Readings	--

Week	2
Date	September 7, 2026
Title	War and Hunger in the Middle East
Description	In this session we unpack the current situation in the Middle East by exploring how the attacks on Iran exposed the fragility of the global food system and discuss how food is weaponized in the war on Gaza.
Key Readings	- Alma Igra, "Hunger Time," LA Review of Books, June 2024. - TBD
Optional Readings	- TBD - TBD

Week	3
Date	September 14, 2026
Title	From Local Foodways to Colonial Diets
Description	In this session, we take a long durée perspective on sugar to illuminate the transformations of food systems before the 1800s.
Key Readings	- Paulina B. Lewicka, <i>Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes: Aspects of Life in an Islamic Metropolis of the Eastern Mediterranean</i> (2011), TBD. - Sidney W. Mintz, <i>Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History</i> (1986), TBD.
Optional Readings	- Marcel Mazoyer et al., <i>A History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis</i> (2006), Chapter 5. - Chris Otter, <i>Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology</i> (2020), Chapter 3.

Week	4
Date	September 21, 2026
Title	Cash Crops, Finance and Empire
Description	By looking into the history of global cotton and wheat trade, we examine the ways in which colonial expansion and imperial finance had shaped food systems in during the 19 th century
Key Readings	- William Cronon, <i>Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West</i>, Reprint edition (1992), Chapter 3. - Aaron Jakes, <i>Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism</i> (2020), Chapter 3.

Optional Readings	- Chris Otter, <i>Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology</i> (2020), Chapter 2. - Sven Beckert, <i>Empire of Cotton: A Global History</i> (2015), TBD.
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Week	5
Date	September 28, 2026
Title	Hunger and the Crises of Food Globalization
Description	We study the consequences of the global food trade under British imperialism around 1900s. We then move to discuss the effects of the Great Depression (1929-39) on global agriculture.
Key Readings	- Mike Davis, <i>Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World</i> (2007), Preface, Chapter 4. - Harriet Friedmann, "The Political Economy of Food: A Global Crisis," <i>New Left Review</i>, 1993, 29-39.
Optional Readings	- Janam Mukherjee, <i>Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire</i> (2016), TBD. - TBD

Week	6
Date	October 5, 2026
Title	Food and Development
Description	In this session, we explore the reciprocal relations between the US dominated global order, development, and food politics after the World War II.
Key Readings	- Ahmad Shokr, <i>Harvests of Liberation: Cotton, Capitalism, and the End of Empire in Egypt</i> (2025), Chapter 6. - TBD
Optional Readings	- Samantha Iyer, <i>Agrarian Superpower: Food, Development, and the Global Ascendancy of the United States</i> (2026), TBD. - TBD.

Week	7
Date	October 12, 2026
Title	Food Systems and the Green Revolution
Description	In this session, we discuss the Green Revolution and explore its role in the history of food systems. We discuss various perspectives on this contested historical phenomenon.
Key Readings	- TBD - TBD
Optional Readings	- Raj Patel, "The Long Green Revolution," <i>Journal of Peasant Studies</i> 40, no. 1 (2013), pages 1-18. - Akhil Gupta, <i>Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India</i> (1998), pages 45-47 and 52-62. - Vandana Shiva, <i>The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics</i> (1991).

Semester Break: Mon, October 19 - Sun, October 25, 2026

Week	8
Date	October 26, 2026
Title	The Meatification of Food Systems
Description	We study the global transition towards animal-products based diet in the second half of the 20 th century.
Key Readings	- Chris Otter, <i>Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology</i> (2020), Chapter 1. - Tony Weis, <i>The Ecological Hoofprint: The Global Burden of Industrial Livestock</i> (2013), TBD.
Optional Readings	- Alex Blanchette, <i>Porkopolis: American Animality, Standardized Life, & the Factory Farm</i> (2020), TBD. - TBD.

The session on November 9, 2026, has been rescheduled to December 14, 2026.

Week	9
Date	November 2, 2026
Title	The Neo-liberalization of Diets
Description	In this session, we discuss the structural transformations of the global food system during the 1970s and 1980s and examine their consequences in Egypt and (TBD).
Key Readings	- Timothy Mitchell, <i>Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity</i> (2002), Chapter 7. - TBD
Optional Readings	- TBD - TBD

Week	10
Date	November 16, 2026
Title	Obesity and Food Privatization
Description	Our food systems produce more food than ever before but at the same time continue to main metabolic and ecologies inequalities. In this session we take the case of Mexico and Britain to highlight the dynamics that have led this paradox.
Key Readings	- Alyshia Gálvez, <i>Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico</i> (2018), Chapter 4. - Chris Otter, <i>Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology</i> (2020), Chapter 7.
Optional Readings	- TBD - TBD

Week	11
Date	November 23, 2026
Title	Food Security and Food Sovereignty
Description	In this session, we examine the recent emergence of Food Security and Food Sovereignty to explore the trends in food systems since the early 2000s.
Key Readings	- Christian Henderson, <i>Monarchies of Extraction: The Gulf States in the Global Food System</i> (2026), Chapter 4. - TBD
Optional Readings	- Shaohua Zhan, <i>China and Global Food Security</i> (2022), TBD. - TBD

Week	12
Date	November 30, 2026
Title	Food, Seeds, and Multinational Corporations
Description	We watch the Last Seed movie which brings together the issues of global dependencies, agricultural transformation and the role of multinational corporations discussed in the previous sessions. https://www.thelastseed.org
Key Readings	- Raj Patel, <i>Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System</i> (2012), Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. - TBD
Optional Readings	- Adam Tooze and Cameron Abado, <i>Ones and Tooze: "The Doomsday Seed Vault"</i>, 15 August 2025 (Link) - Jennifer Clapp, <i>Titans of Industrial Agriculture: How a Few Giant Corporations Came to Dominate the Farm Sector and Why It Matters</i> (2025).

Week	13
Date	December 7, 2026
Title	Activism and the Future of Food Systems
Description	In this session we host a food activist/s in class and discuss various proposals that outline the future of food systems.
Key Readings	- Julie Guthman, <i>The Problem with Solutions: Why Silicon Valley Can't Hack the Future of Food</i> (2024), Introduction, Chapter 3, 4. - TBD
Optional Readings	- TBD - TBD

Week	14
Date	December 14, 2026 (rescheduled from November 9)
Title	Conclusion and Project Presentations
Description	We conclude the course by bringing together the main themes discussed in class. Students will present their final projects.
Key Readings	---
Optional Readings	---

Essay Deadlines

Midterm Essay: 26 October 2026

Final Project: 18 December 2026

***Graduating students should contact me for an earlier submission date for their final project.**

Readings:

All readings will be made available as PDF documents on the Google Classroom Platform. I will provide a link for our online classroom in our first session.

***If there is a discrepancy between the syllabus and the readings on Google Classroom, please follow the Google Classroom readings. If you are unsure which texts to read, please contact me.**