Sociology 401c: Food and Social Inequality  
Autumn Quarter, 2007

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Class Meets: Tuesdays and Thursdays  
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2:00-3:30 or by  
2:30-4:20, Denny 307  
appointment, Condon 334

“Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you what you are””  
Jean Athelme Brillat-Savarin

Overview

The primary aim of this course is to help you understand social inequality through the lens of food. Eating is one of the most basic of human activities, and yet sociologists, anthropologists, and biologists have observed great variability in patterns of both food production and consumption. Over time and across places, human societies address their nutritional needs in different ways and with varying success. In light of this variation, examining what people eat, how much they eat, where it comes from, and the meaning they attribute to it can shed great light on the processes that create and maintain inequality in social systems.

In general, the course provides a historical and comparative overview of what people eat and how this relates to other types of inequality. We will explore how changes in production relate to inequality, and learn about the symbolic meanings of food, paying particular attention to how food may knit together members of ethnic and religious groups. Throughout the course, we will explicitly consider historical and cross-cultural comparisons in our quest to better understand the landscape of social inequality.

Among other questions, we will ask:

- To what extent are food preferences the properties of individuals, and to what extent are they socially structured?
- To what extent do food opportunities and patterns of food consumption reflect existing inequalities, and to what extent do food opportunities shape the structure of social inequality?
- In what ways do food-related practices shape social boundaries?
Course Goals

I have both substantive and practical learning goals for this course. Substantively, by the conclusion of the course you should:

• Be familiar with the basic nutritional needs of humans and have a sense of various ways that societies have responded to these needs;

• Understand how patterns of food production shape the structure and interdependencies of groups in society; and

• Appreciate how food-related practices contribute to social solidarity and inequality, both within and across groups.

Practically, you will have an opportunity to:

• Scrutinize your own food opportunities and food-related behavior;
• Critically review social scientific literature on food;
• Conduct original quantitative or qualitative research;
• Write about and share findings of your sociological research with peers.

Course Requirements

• Conduct a focused inquiry research project (30%)
• Complete three short essays/problem sets (PS 1 = 10%; PS 2 = 15%; PS 3 = 15%)
• Take an in-class midterm exam on November 14 (20%)
• Maintain a regular Food Log (10%). Instructions for entries will be posted on the course website
• Regularly attend class and participate in informed ways in class activities and discussions (priceless)

Focused Inquiries  Focused inquiries are small, contained research projects. You will begin with a question, conduct a preliminary literature review, and bring some empirical data to bear on your attempt to answer it. Your research project will result in a 15-20 minute presentation (10% of your grade) to the class as well as a short (5-10 page) written report (20% of your grade). While each of you will conduct your own focused inquiry, students interested in similar topics may form a research group and work on linked projects. Examples of possible topics and detailed guidelines for these projects will be available early in the quarter. We will spend time developing and trouble-shooting research projects throughout the quarter, and I will ask you to turn in interim reports along the way. Each focused inquiry should include:

• A statement of your question;
• A discussion of why it is sociologically interesting or important;
• Your preliminary ideas about what you think the answer is
• Analysis of data that bear directly on your question;
• Interpretation of your results.

Food Logs: Food Logs offer an opportunity to record aspects of your own eating habits and observations about others' interactions with and around food. The idea is not for me or anyone else to monitor your consumption patterns, but rather to provide you with a vehicle to reconsider what food tells us about social relations, inequality, and solidarity. For your food logs, I will ask you to consider a particular aspect of your food-related interactions (where does your food come from, who do you eat with, do you take 'food risks,' how much do you spend on food, etc.); my hope is that active and regular reflection will enhance the quality of your engagement with the course material and ultimately leave you with a rich and long-lasting understanding of how this most ordinary of activities reflects deeper social arrangements. Food logs will be graded on a P/F basis.

Course Website
The course website is located at:  http://courses.washington.edu/soc401b

Check often for updates, announcements, and relevant materials, including electronic readings.

Special Thanks
Special thanks are due to the Office of Undergraduate Education, which has generously supported the international and global aspects of this course.

Important Dates:

- **October 2**  Draft of Problem Set 1 due
- **October 9**  Revised Problem Set 1 due
- **October 11**  Food log due
- **October 16**  Problem Set 2 due
- **October 25**  Midterm
- **November 1**  Food log due
- **November 6**  Problem Set # 3 (part 1) due
- **November 13**  Problem Set # 3 (part 2) due
- **November 15**  Food log due
- **November 20**  Presentations
- **November 27**  Presentations
- **December 4**  Presentations/Food log due
- **December 11**  Final Research Report due by 5 pm
Weekly Outline

N.B. This is a tentative outline, and is subject to change.

Week 1  Course Overview
Readings
- Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (http://www.fao.org/)

Week 2  Conceptual Primers: Inequality and Nutrition
Readings
- Hurst, Charles. Chapters 2, 3, and 8 in Social Inequality: Forms, Causes, and Consequences.

Week 3  Variation in What We Eat
Readings
- Gabaccia, Donna. 1998. “Colonial Creoles” Chapter 1 in We Are What we Eat.

Week 4  Variation in What We Eat (continued)
Readings

Week 5  Food and Social Organization
Readings
Week 6 Industrial Food Production
Readings


Week 7 Local Food Opportunities
Readings


Week 8 Food and Social Solidarity (ethnicity, religion, region)
Readings

- Gabaccia, Donna. 1998. We Are What We Eat.

Week 9-11 Results of Our Research/Wrap-Up and Festivities