

**The University of Vermont College of Agriculture and Life Sciences**

Department of Agriculture, Landscape and Environment (ALE) 6140

**Agroecology, Food Sovereignty, and Social Movements:**

*Lessons from Struggles to Liberate the Land and Abolish Food Empires*



Thursdays, 12:00-2:00 PM, fully online  
Instructor: Dr. Nils McCune (he/him/his)  
Email: [nils.mccune@uvm.edu](mailto:nils.mccune@uvm.edu)  
Office Hours: Monday, 3:00-5:00pm (by appointment)

**Land acknowledgement**

The campus of the University of Vermont sits within a place of gathering and exchange, shaped by water and stewarded by ongoing generations of Indigenous peoples. We want to honor the legacy of Vermont's Indigenous people, the Abenaki People of the Dawn, who have cared for this land for generations and continue to do so. We recognize that colonialism and the oppression of Native peoples are a current and ongoing process, and we commit to building our awareness of our present role in this process. We pay our respects to the elders past and present. We honor with deep gratitude this land and all it gives us.

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## **COURSE SHORT DESCRIPTION**

**Racist, sexist, and colonial food systems reflect the deep scars and injustices of history and the present. People’s movements of all kinds are strategically using agroecology as a guide and method for building and restoring popular stewardship of food systems, healing the land and each other, and constructing a solidarity economy.**

## **PROGRAM SNAPSHOT**

<b>First day of Class</b>	<b>Self-Representation Assignment Due</b>	<b>Fields of Knowledge Assignment Due</b>	<b>Semester Project Due</b>	<b>Last day of Class</b>
<b>January 16, 2025</b>	<b>January 23, 2025</b>	<b>February 13, 2025</b>	<b>April 17, 2025</b>	<b>May 1, 2025</b>

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

The rapid and profound transformation of our food systems based on the principles of agroecology is as urgent to planetary survival as it is challenging in the political context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This course is an examination of the politics of food systems, but rather than taking a dry look at political economy or public policies, we will explore the emerging politics of ongoing struggle, engaging with the perspectives of the organized movements that have spent the last decades creating an alternative paradigm, called food sovereignty. What does food sovereignty mean, and what is its relationship to agroecology? Within a hostile political and economic system, how can agroecology become a tool for transforming territories and healing the land?

Engaging with Kurt Lewin’s thesis that the best way to understand something is to try to change it, this course will invite global leaders of the movement for food sovereignty to share lessons from the field. Students will use weekly reading and reflection sections to deepen their grasp of classic and contemporary debates about farming models, knowledge, politics and organizing in the food system. We will employ some of the pedagogical methods used by movements themselves to co-create a conscious and safe environment of learning, debate and critical thinking.

While academics work with agroecology as an emerging field that integrates multiple disciplines, social movements have described it as a tool in the construction of people's sovereignty over food systems. Through both individual and group work and an international roster of guest speakers, this course will engage with social movements' reflexive understandings of themselves, their critical analysis of the systems that they are fighting for and against, their intentional social processes and mechanisms for organizing, their relationship to agroecology, and their vision for food sovereignty. This course examines case studies of current and historic social movements, from Indigenous Land Back to Black Agrarians to La Vía Campesina, that have dared to use agroecology as a tool for liberation, and explores the socioeconomic, cultural, political, ecological, and pedagogical dynamics of these struggles. Course participants will critically examine agroecology and food sovereignty as mobilizing concepts. By reflecting on their own constituencies, students will analyze the potential for solidarity across differences in building liberation praxis to confront exploitation, injustice, and empire, and leave legacies of healthy land, heirloom seeds, fruits, freedom, and equality for future generations.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this course, students will be prepared to:

- Apply critical social, cultural and political theory about change and evolution of food systems into their own work and community contexts
- Locate the roots of agroecology and food sovereignty in indigenous cosmovisions, revolutionary movements and the dialogues among ways of knowing
- Reflect on trajectories of food system change, based on real-world examples from the US and across the world
- Contribute to collective and strategic decision-making processes connected to agroecology, to support meaningful change at diverse scales

## **COURSE PEDAGOGY**

### ➤ **Online learning community**

In this course, we will set into motion some of the pedagogical approaches and methods employed by rural social movements in their autonomous schools of agroecology and food sovereignty. This requires leaning into the potential for transforming online learning into an interactive, empowering experience and trusting one another as our companions in a

journey of learning and personal growth, while grounding ourselves in our different geographical contexts and realities. Multiple truths and horizontal learning are enabled through small group projects, curriculum co-design, and creative inquiry. Readings and videos supplement interactive sessions, group discussions, and individual reflection.

Our synchronic online sessions will include both short lectures on the course material and a discussion of the major questions and debates covered in the readings that week. These discussions are an integral part of the course; an opportunity to combine our knowledge, learn from each other, and reflect on the major questions that we are exploring that week. It is your responsibility to come to class having read the assigned readings and having written critically about them in your notebook.

### ➤ **Readings and transmedia**

This class can be thought of as a “food sovereignty reading group.” Each week, you will have assigned readings, as well as non-mandatory recommended readings and links to interesting videos or podcasts. However, as Paulo Freire observed, “No one educates anyone else nor do we educate ourselves; we educate one another in communion in the context of living in this world.”

**I ask all students to please use a notebook to write, draw, and/or map your ideas as you read.**

You will need to upload a photo of your reading notebook to each week’s reading onto the course Padlet page, with a deadline of midnight on the night before our Thursday class session. This reflection should be handmade (not written on a Word or Pages document), and should show the concepts, reflections, feelings, or anything else that comes up for you as you read. It can be a written letter to the instructor or to anyone else (please write legibly!), a concept map, notes of ideas, a full-blown drawing, a poem, or anything else that makes sense given what you are reading and what you want to do with the reading. Try to combine images with words, and let your creativity be a factor in your learning! Also, please keep in mind that all students will be able to see your work.

### ➤ **Small groups and pair work**

Part of the adult learning process has to do with developing collaboration and communication skills. This is particularly true in academic and movement spaces.

This course is designed in such a way that all students should be able to directly work with all other students at some time or another in the course. One of the best ways to do this with the limited time we will have together is to create diverse opportunities for working in pairs. Pair work in this course will primarily be focused on the course content, in two ways. First, students will sign up for the week in which they would like to help guide the discussion of the reading. Two students can sign up for each week, and these students will need to find time to communicate outside of class hours to prepare for their facilitation.

Each week, one pair will lead a discussion of the reading for 10 minutes, followed by a plenary discussion where everyone is invited to participate. This discussion will generally have two guiding questions:

- (1) Who is the author? Why are they writing and who are they writing for? What was the current debate at the time of the writing?
- (2) How is this reading relevant to your work?

The other kind of pair work will be based on “emerging topics”—student-defined issues that we will discuss in class. We will have a shared document where all of us can help compile what I call “emerging topics”—these are areas of interest for learning/teaching and action/reflection. You are welcome to add a topic that you would like to learn more about during this semester. Simply add a topic to the “emerging topics” document. If you have them, provide some links to help us access information about that topic, and if you feel ready to help us explore the topic, please add your name as a potential lead person for that emerging topic. When two students have signed up as lead people for a topic, we will schedule a date for a 20-minute discussion of that topic. All students will need to facilitate at least one discussion of an emerging topic.

In addition to pair work, our course is also based upon collective learning processes that take place in permanent small groups. In social movement schools, these groups are often called “base nuclei” or “base groups.” Base groups engage with course content, but they are also the basis for creating a self-governance structure within the classroom, where students can propose, change, and transform their own learning environment, as well as taking responsibility for some of the tasks that come with maintaining that environment. With my support, you will have the task of building and maintaining these groups, which will meet to discuss community agreements, content and structure, and contribute actively to course organization.

➤ **Project-based learning**

In addition to uploading some of your writing, notes, drawings or thoughts each week, plus facilitating discussions of reading and emerging topics, you will be asked to carry out two projects over the course of the semester. One is individual and will develop over the whole semester. The other is short-term and will be carried out through your base group. Descriptions of both assignments are below.

### **Semester project: Food Sovereignty Oral History Project**

The Food Sovereignty Oral History Project (FSOHP) is a collaborative between the Institute for Agroecology at the University of Vermont, Vermont Folklife and Rural Vermont to collect oral histories of people who have struggled for food sovereignty in Vermont and across the world. Working from across the US, Bangladesh, Canada, Ghana, Italy, Puerto Rico, Peru, South Africa during 2025, students and faculty worked with communities to interview and archive the stories of 30 farmers, organizers, activists, community leaders and others who have created, restored, and enlivened the struggle for a fair, decentralized, culturally centered and ecologically sound food system.

FSOHP is a living archive and a testament to the people who have made food sovereignty what it is today-- a lighthouse of hope for a planet in which all can flourish.

This will be individual work that each person directs. Based on your Pathways and Fields of Knowing assignments, you will begin to define a Semester Project.

For this project, it is important that the following elements be present:

- ❖ *Integration of key concepts*—are you able to bring to bear the principles of agroecology and food sovereignty?
- ❖ *Exploration*—are you creatively engaged?
- ❖ *Critical capacity*—are you going beyond superficial and one-dimensional approaches to show your own capacity for analysis?
- ❖ *Ethics*— are you providing for the good of society, and showing responsibility, coherence, humility and respect?
- ❖ *Transdisciplinarity and plurality*— are you demonstrating a sense of positionality drawing diverse forms of knowledge, and engaging with diverse audiences?

The semester project involves making contact with an individual or a group of people to provide you with some wisdom or orientation about a topic of your choice. I call these people “knowledge mentors”. Try to put a lot of thought into who you will reach out to and how you will create a spirit of collaboration with the person, people, and or organizations you might contact. For this project in 2025, we are emphasizing conversations with elders.

Your topic could be the knowledge mentor(s) themselves, as an individual, collective or institutional entity. This could mean deepening an understanding of their context, history, trajectory, territory, identity, among other angles. Alternatively, your topic could be some aspect of the cause or struggle of your knowledge mentors, or the principles that are activated through their work, or indeed their adversary. What is important is that somehow, the communication that you develop with your knowledge mentor(s) deepens your exploration and helps you bring the bullet-pointed elements to bear in your semester project.

From the start it is important to be thinking about what you might offer to your knowledge mentor(s). How can you be reciprocal in working with this community? How would you like for this person or collective to remember what it was like working with you? How can your own behavior be a lesson in the principles of agroecology and food sovereignty?

If you define your topic as “the commons” you might reach out to staff at Agrarian Trust; if you are interested in “food sovereignty principles in fishing” than you might reach out to the North American Marine Alliance, or a similar organization where you live. You may need to contact people by email, by phone or by walking into their offices. If you are unable to make contact with anyone with experience in your field, you may need to change topic. The instructor can support you in making these contacts.

You will be learning more about your topic from these real-world experts. Please think about what kinds of methods you will be using, and how to prevent creating an extractive relationship with your knowledge mentor. Is there any way to be reciprocal with this person, even as you ask them to share their knowledge with you? Try to learn a little about how this person came to be where they are in the world of agroecology and food sovereignty. What was the world like when they began to work for agroecology and food sovereignty? What can this person teach you, and future generations? What principles of agroecology and food sovereignty has the person activated, and how are they being put into practice?

What you’ll be turning in: this will be an audio interview, as well as any form of communication that you can readily upload to Padlet. In the last two class sessions of the semester, participants in the course will be presenting their final projects along with the reflections they’ve had over the course of the experience. We’ll want to know what kind of methods you developed, how you negotiated with your knowledge mentor(s), and what kinds of co-commitment, co-labor, and co-operation took place during the making of your project.

➤ **Critical friendships**

Twice during the semester, students will engage with a critical friend of their choice to receive feedback on their semester projects. Critical friends are people who can show empathy, love, and compassion as they also support you in finding gaps in your thinking, additional need for reflection, and/or greater critical and self-critical capacity. You may choose someone from within the class group, or someone from outside class. More information on critical friendships is available [here](#).

## **GRADING**

This course is based on active co-construction of knowledge. Your participation is not only important for your grade, but even more so because it creates a rich environment for thinking together, exploring ideas and engaging with one another's experiences. Participation begins with being present in all the synchronous online sessions of the course. We will try to accommodate absences due to emergent situations, but the pedagogy of the course is based on full attendance in each session. Please understand that not all students will have the same access to internet and there may be technological hiccups to manage as we begin the course together. This course will take a holistic approach toward participation, in which presence in online sessions, student facilitation of parts of the course in groups, and written reflections will be examined as a whole.

Grading will be based on the following breakdown:

- ❖ semester project (40%)
- ❖ participation and attendance (20%)
- ❖ portfolio of individual and group work (20%)
- ❖ facilitation of discussion on reading (10%)
- ❖ facilitation of emerging topics (10%)

Grading will be based on the following scale:

A 94-100  
A- 90-93  
B+ 87-89  
B 83-86  
B- 80-82  
C+ 77-79  
C 73-76  
C- 70-72  
F below 70

## **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest, and responsible manner, serving as a basic guiding principle for all academic activity. Academic integrity includes a commitment not to engage in or tolerate acts of falsification, misrepresentation or deception. Such acts of dishonesty violate the fundamental ethical principles of the University community and compromise the worth of work completed by others.

Unless explicitly directed otherwise by the instructor, all assignments are expected to be the student's own original work completed individually without collaboration. Violations of this code of conduct can result in reduced grades and can be reported to the College or University for further action. Academic integrity requires that all work be original or properly cited (author, date, and specific page numbers, if appropriate.) Any idea that is not your own must be cited. Please see UVM's [Code of Academic Integrity](#) if you have more questions.

## **STUDENTS WITH DISABILITES**

The University of Vermont recognizes disability as a part of diversity, integral to society and to our campus community. Please reach out to me to let me know how best to accommodate you in our course community.

## **COUNSELING AND MENTAL HEALTH**

In keeping with University policy, any student with a documented disability interested in utilizing ADA accommodations should contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS), the office of Disability Services on campus for students. SAS works with students and faculty in an interactive process to explore reasonable and appropriate accommodations, which are communicated to faculty in an accommodation letter. All students are strongly recommended to discuss with their faculty the accommodations they plan to use in each course. Faculty who receive Letters of Accommodation with Disability Related Flexible accommodations will need to fill out the Disability Related Flexibility Agreement. Any questions from faculty or students on the agreement should be directed to the SAS specialist who is indicated on the letter.

Contact SAS:

A170 Living/Learning Center; 802-656-7753

[access@uvm.edu](mailto:access@uvm.edu) [www.uvm.edu/access](http://www.uvm.edu/access)

## **RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS**

Students have the right to practice the religion of their choice. If you need to miss class to observe a religious holiday, please submit the dates of your absence to me in writing by the end of the second full week of classes. You will be permitted to make up work within a mutually agreed-upon time.

<https://www.uvm.edu/registrar/religious-holidays>