



EXPLORE

MIT ANTHROPOLOGY FACULTY

Heather PAXSON*William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Anthropology**Margaret MacVicar Faculty Fellow**Director of Graduate Studies, HASTS*

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Heather Paxson is interested in how people craft a sense of themselves as moral beings through everyday practices, especially those activities having to do with family and food. She is the author of two ethnographic monographs: *Making Modern Mothers: Ethics and Family Planning in Urban Greece* (University of California Press, 2004) and *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America* (University of California Press, 2012). Her recent work explores domestic artisanal cheese and the people who make it, analyzing how craftwork has become a new source of cultural and economic value within American landscapes of production and consumption. At MIT, Heather teaches courses on craft, ethnographic research, food, and gender. In 2010-11, with colleague Stefan Helmreich she co-directed a Sawyer Seminar on the Comparative Study of Cultures entitled "Sensing the Unseen." Heather Paxson received a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Stanford University and a B.A. from Haverford College.

Research**Anthropology of Food**

Through telling the stories of American cheesemakers, *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America* details the challenges of making a life and a living through artisan production. Artisanal cheeses are alive with meaning, and also with the activity of organisms large and microscopic. They are "unfinished" commodities—living products whose qualities are not fully settled—that embody old and new American ideas about taste, labor, and value.

Anthropology of Reproduction

In the 1990s, Heather Paxson conducted doctoral fieldwork in Athens, Greece, investigating changing ideas about motherhood and fertility control in this child-loving Mediterranean society where the abortion rate is twice the national birth rate. *Making Modern Mothers: Ethics and Family Planning in Urban Greece* argues that Athenian women have incorporated abortion into a moral—indeed, maternal—framework, in which it may be better to interrupt a pregnancy than to raise a child inadequately. But there is more to the story. Amidst nationalist concern over declining birth rates, the increased consumption of reproductive technologies and consumer goods generates profound ambivalence in Athenians' moral evaluations of abortion, contraception, and in vitro fertilization. At stake are ideas about what it means to be Greek—or more particularly, a Greek woman or man—in the modern world.

Selected Publications

- 2011 [The 'Art' and 'Science' of Handcrafting Cheese in the United States](#). *Endeavour*, special issue on food, history, and science. 35(2-3): 116-124.
- 2010 [Cheese Cultures: Transforming American Tastes and Traditions](#). *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 10(4): 35-47.
- 2010 [Locating Value in Artisan Cheese: Reverse-Engineering Terroir for New World Landscapes](#). *American Anthropologist* 112(3): 442-455.
- 2008 [Post-Pasteurian Cultures: The Microbiopolitics of Raw-Milk Cheese in the United States](#). *Cultural Anthropology* 23(1): 15-47.
- 2007 [A Fluid Mechanics of Erotas and Aghape: Family Planning and Maternal Consumption in Contemporary Greece](#). In *Love and Globalization: Transformations of Intimacy in the Contemporary World*, Mark B. Padilla, Jennifer S. Hirsch, Miguel Muñoz-Laboy, Robert E. Sember, and Richard G. Parker, eds. Pp. 120-138. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- 2006 [Reproduction as Spiritual Kin Work: Orthodoxy, IVF and the Moral Economy of Motherhood in Greece](#). *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 30(4): 481-505.
- 2002 [Rationalizing Sex: Family Planning and the Making of Modern Lovers in Urban Greece](#). *American Ethnologist* 29(2): 307-344.

To see a full publication list with links to downloadable PDFs, please [click here](#).

Teaching

21A.155

Food, Culture and Politics

In eating, humans incorporate into our very bodies the products of nature (e.g., plant and animal resources) turned into culture (food). This course explores connections between what we eat and who we are through cross-cultural study of how personal identities and social groups are formed via food production, preparation, distribution, and consumption. Readings are organized around critical discussion of what makes good food good (e.g., nutritious, safe, tasty, authentic, ethical). A primary goal of the course is to provide students with theoretical and empirical tools to understand and evaluate food systems at local and global levels.
[course website](#)

21A.501J / STS.074J

Art, Craft, Science

As realms of practical knowledge, what distinguishes art, craft, and science? How do people learn, practice, and evaluate traditional and contemporary craft techniques? To address such questions, this course reviews theories of design, embodiment, apprenticeship learning, skill, labor, expertise, and tacit knowledge. We also discuss the commoditization of craft into market goods, collectible art, and tourism industries. Ethnographic and historical case studies include textiles, Shaker furniture, glassblowing, quilting, cheesemaking, industrial design, home and professional cooking, factory and laboratory work, CAD-CAM. In-class demonstrations, a field trip, and hands-on craft projects are included.

21A.801J / EC.702J / STS.071J

Cross-Cultural Investigations: Technology and Development

(a.k.a. D-Lab: Dialogue) From engineering and development projects to social entrepreneurship and disaster relief, cross-cultural research and collaboration is increasingly common. But working across cultural, economic, and political divides is not easy. This course trains students in qualitative research methods and cross-cultural communication skills while investigating how cultural practices and institutional power dynamics influence the adoption of new technologies. Students will discover the excitement and dilemmas of designing and carrying out fieldwork by venturing off campus to practice doing interviews, conducting participant-observation research, and honing techniques of cross-cultural communication. Students will also review case studies in appropriate technology design and transfer and, working in teams, draft plans for improved practice. The course is open to all interested students but is designed particularly for those planning exploratory research or applied work abroad.

21A.111J / WGS.172J

Rethinking the Family, Sex and Gender

This course introduces students to the anthropological study of the social institutions and symbolic meanings of family, household, gender, and sexuality. We will explore the myriad forms that families and households take and evaluate their social, emotional, and economic dynamics. In particular, we will analyze how people's expectations for, and experiences of, family life are rooted in or challenged by particular conceptions of gender and sexuality.

[course website](#)

21A.439J / STS.429J

Food and Power

This graduate seminar offers an overview of anthropological and historical analyses of food production, processing, and consumption in the US and globally. Emphasizes the social and technical practices of raising crops and livestock; efforts to preserve as well as create new foods; the industrialization and de-industrialization of food; the relationship between food supply and safety and the state; the role of class and gender in consumption patterns; and the historical and cultural act of eating.

Awards

- 2014 Margaret MacVicar Faculty Fellow, MIT
- 2013 Diana Forsythe Book Prize, The Society for the Anthropology of Work and the Committee on the Anthropology of Science, Technology, and Computing for *The Life of Cheese*
- 2011 James A. and Ruth Levitan Teaching Prize in the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, MIT
- 2009 Mary I. Bunting Institute Fellow, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study
- 2009 Belasco Prize for Scholarly Excellence, Association for the Study of Food and Society
- 2008 MIT Class of 1957 Career Development Professorship
- 2008 James A. and Ruth Levitan Research Prize in the Humanities
- 2008 Everett Moore Baker Memorial Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, MIT

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- CV (pdf)
 - Video: Thought for Food
 - "Against the Common Gouda" (MIT News Office)
 - "Ecologies of Value" (Harvard Gazette)
 - "Cutting the Curd Book Review — an Interview with Heather Paxson" (Heritage Radio Network)
 - "Field Note — Food: Deviation" (Cultural Anthro Blog)
 - "On the Post-Pasteurian" (CASTAC Blog)

Risk Perception & Categorization:
Artisanship in the 21st Century



Soap Box: The Political Life of Cheese



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