

History 131-02

Consumer Culture in America

Spring 2007

MW 12:50-2:20

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Office Hours: Monday 2:30-3:30, Friday 1:00-3:00, and by appointment

Course Description: This course examines the historical evolution of America's consumer culture from its modest beginnings in the 18th century to the prominent role it plays in contemporary American society. Topics to be covered include the role of consumption in pre-industrial America, the development of the department store in the late 19th century, the emergence of modern advertising in the early 20th century, the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, and class have shaped people's response to the new consumer culture, and the different strands of cultural criticism and waves of political activism that have contested the shape of America's consumer culture.

Teaching Method: Discussion.

Attendance Policy: Because the success of seminars depend largely upon the participation of the students, attendance is mandatory. More than two absences (for any reason) will detract severely from one's participation grade.

Plagiarism Policy: Students are expected to do their own work and to provide proper attribution when using someone else's words or ideas. The instructor will rigorously enforce the university's strict policy regarding academic dishonesty.

Evaluation: Each student will complete the following assignments:

- four memoranda of conversation (10%)

- one 1500 word essay due Feb. 5 (15%)

- one 2000 word essay due March 21 (20%)

- a 2000 word take-home final essay due May 4 (25%)

- participate actively in each class discussion (30%)

Definitions:

--The Memorandum of Conversation is a free-form (yet thoughtful) response to the reading. It should be no less than one single-spaced page. Think of it as your way of setting the agenda for that day's discussion by telling me what interested, disturbed, confused, or surprised you about the reading. Although the normal rules of paragraphing, argumentation, etc. do not apply to this exercise, these memoranda should not just be your gut reactions (i.e. "this book was boring" or "this book was great"). I want you to mix your labor with these texts and exhibit your original insights. The best memos will open with a clear and concise summary of the central argument(s) of the reading(s) and then go on to critique those arguments, ask questions, make connections to other readings for the course, or do anything else that reveals a deep engagement with the readings. Note: memos are due via-e-mail by 9PM the night before class so that I have time to read them before the discussion.

--I will distribute the questions for the essays later in the semester. These assignments will not require you to do any outside reading or research.

--The take-home final will be an essay exam. It is expected that your essay will incorporate a wide range of readings and weave together a few key themes from the semester. Think of the memos and other essays that you write during the semester as trial grounds for the ideas you will develop in this final essay.

Required Books:

[Both books can be purchased at the Willamette Bookstore.]

- 1) Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (2001)

- 2) Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (2001 ed.)

CLASS SCHEDULE

Listed readings that are not in the required books are either on electronic reserve at the library (**R**) or are available in journals to which the library has electronic access (**Library**). Students are expected to obtain copies of those readings well ahead of time in case of unforeseen complications. It is also recommended that you get a three ring binder to keep all of these supplemental readings organized. [Note: each reserve reading is listed under the author's name and a shortened title, i.e. Schmitt—Marx and Engels.]

Unit 1: Theory and Case Study—fast food, capitalism, and the dynamics of contemporary consumer culture

Jan. 15—Introduction to course themes.

Jan. 17—What is capitalism? What is a commodity? What is the relationship between consumption and production?

Reading: 1) Richard Schmitt, *Introduction to Marx & Engels*, 63-97 (**R**)

2) Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 1-10.

Jan 22—The economics, culture, and politics of fast food

Reading: 1) Schlosser, 13-107

Jan 24—What chemical plants, factory farms, and union busters have to do with the price of that value meal

Reading: 1) Schlosser, 111-166

Jan 29—Should we be afraid of Ronald McDonald?

Reading: 1) Schlosser, 169-270

Jan 31—Too much hand wringing?

Reading: 1) Colin Campbell, "Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming," *Critical Review* 8 (Fall 1994), 503-520. (R)

2) James Twitchell, "Two Cheers for Materialism," (1999), 9 pages (R)

3) A substantive criticism of Schlosser's book that you find on your own (**Note: be sure to print this out and bring it to class along with a 2-3 sentence summary of the piece's criticism. You will hand this in at the end of class.)

Feb. 5—**1500-word paper due at the beginning of class.**

(In-class screening of *Is Wal-Mart Good for America?*)

Unit 2: Consuming Selves—the historical evolution of America's economy and culture of consumption

Feb. 7—Consumption in 17th and 18th century America

Writing: Group A memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) T.H. Breen, "Baubles of Britain: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present* 119 (1988), 73-104. (R)

2) James Axtell, "The First Consumer Revolution," 14 pages (R)

Feb 12—How much difference does 200 years make? Comparing your world of goods with that of your early American predecessors.

Assignment: Bring to class an inventory of your dorm room. (Bring one copy with your name on it (to hand in) and one copy without your name (to serve as a historical artifact for your classmates)).

Reading: 1) Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life: 1790-1840*, 121-148. (R)

2) Collection of 18th century probate records (**e-mail**)

Feb. 14—Early nineteenth century attitudes toward consumption

Writing: Group B memo due by 9am.

- Reading:** 1) Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., v. 47, no. 1 (Jan., 1990), 3-12. **(Library) **NOTE: This article continues on to p. 29, but you only need to read up to p. 12.**
- 2) David Jaffee, "Peddlars of Progress and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1760-1860," *Journal of American History*, 78, no. 2 (Sep. 1991), 511-535. **(Library)**

Feb. 19—The anxieties and enticements of consumer culture for rural Northerners

Writing: Group C memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860," *Journal of Social History* 13, no. 2 (1979), 169-190. **(Library)**

2) Thomas Schlereth, "Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America," in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, p. 339-375. **(R)**

Feb 21—The invention of the department store and the re-making of urban consumers

Writing: Group A memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) William Leach, *Land of Desire*, 15-70 **(R)**

Feb 26—Women shoppers and the production of desire ca. 1900

Writing: Group B memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (1989), 13-41, 148-172. **(R)**

Feb. 28--The changing tenor of modern life and the expansion of consumer culture

Writing: Group C memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 23-48. (Part 1, ch. 1-3)

2) Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 1-24. **(R)**

March 5—The politics of advertising: selling Americans on the system

Reading: 1) Ewen, 51-109 (you can skim 69-76) (Part 2, ch. 1-6)

March 7—Advertising as parable: why those advertisements worked.

Reading: 1) Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 206-234, 335-363 **(R)**

March 12—Advertising and the modern self

Writing: Group A memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Warren Sussman, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth Century Culture,” in *Culture as History* (1984), 271-286. **(R)**

2) William Leach, *Land of Desire*, 225-260. **(R)**

March 14—Consumerism and the re-configuration of the American family

Writing: Group B memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Ewen 113-84 (Part 3, ch. 1-7)

March 19—Consumption and the social construction of gender

Writing: Group C memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Steven Gelber, “Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity,” *American Quarterly* 49.1 (1997), 66-112. **(Library)**

2) Kathy Peiss, “Making Faces: The Cosmetics Industry and the Cultural Construction of Gender, 1890-1930,” in *Unequal Sisters* (2000), 324-345. **(R)**

March 21--**2000 word paper due in class**

SPRING BREAK

Unit 3: Consumer Resistance—Voices of protests and movements for change

April 2—Thoreau and the voluntary simplicity challenge

Reading: 1) Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), Chapter 1 (Economy). Text can be found at <http://thoreau.eserver.org/walden00.html>. Be sure to read the entirety of Chapter 1.

2) Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating,” (1990) 6 pages **(R)**

April 4—Consumer “choice” as mystification and manipulation

Reading: 1) Excerpt from John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958)

2) Steven Waldman, “The Tyranny of Choice,” *The New Republic* (January 27, 1992) <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=11930712&site=ehost-live>

3) Lewis Lapham, “School Bells,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 2000. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=3339334&site=ehost-live>

April 9— Feminist critiques of consumerism

Reading: 1) Elaine Tyler May, “The Commodity Gap: Consumerism and the Modern Home,”
in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 162-182. **(R)**

2) Excerpts from Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), 20 pages **(R)**

3) Susan J. Douglas, “Narcissism as Liberation,” in Jennifer Scanlon, ed., *The Gender
and Consumer Culture Reader*, 267-282. **(R)**

April 11—Culture, cool, and co-optation

Writing: Group A memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (1997), 53-73. **(R)**

2) Daniel Harris, “Coolness,” in *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic* (2000), 51-77. **(R)**

3) Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (2000), 27-50. **(R)**

April 16—Consumer activism in the 19th and early 20th centuries

Writing: Group B memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Lawrence Glickman, “‘Buy for the Sake of the Slave’: Abolitionism and the Origins of American Consumer Activism,” *American Quarterly* 56.4 (2004), 889-912. **(Library)**

2) Cheryl Greenberg, “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work,” from *Or Does It Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (1997) 32 pages **(R)**

April 18—no class, SSRD

April 23— Post WWII Consumer activism

Writing: Group C memo due by 9am.

Reading: 1) Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003), 345-97. **(R)**

2) Find a few examples on the web of contemporary groups who are engaged in consumer activism. Bring copies of some of their statements to class.

April 25—Is there a problem with all of this criticism of consumer culture?

Reading: 1) Michael Schudson, "Delectable Materialism: Second Thoughts on Consumer Culture," (1998), 17 pages (**R**)

2) Stuart Ewen, "Consumer Report: The Social Crisis of the Mass Culture," in *Captains of Consciousness*, 187-220.

April 30-- What modern day critics are up against

Reading: 1) Malcom Gladwell, "The Science of Shopping," *The New Yorker* (November 4, 1996), http://www.gladwell.com/1996/1996_11_04_a_shopping.htm

2) Malcom Gladwell, "The Coolhunt," *The New Yorker* (March 17, 1997), http://www.gladwell.com/1997/1997_03_17_a_cool.htm

3) Patrick McGeehan, "The Plastic Trap: Soaring Interest Compounds Credit Card Pain for Millions," *New York Times*, (November 21, 2004) Follow the link at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/credit/>

4) Michael Barbaro, "Attention, Holiday Shoppers: We Have Fisticuffs in Aisle 2," *New York Times* November 25, 2006. (**e-mail**)

Final 2000-word essay due Friday May 4 at 5pm.