

American Studies 409
Consumer Culture
Spring 2009
Wednesdays, 4-7 pm

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What are the politics of shopping? When an individual goes shopping, that individual engages with larger forces that are simultaneously economic, political, and cultural. The point of consumption is the point when individuals most regularly interact with these larger forces: we all go shopping more often than we vote. Thus, examining the politics of shopping means choosing a key vantage point from which to examine the politics of everyday life in America. From the boycotts of the American Revolution to current campaigns against globalization, this course will investigate the power of consumer culture in America.

Course Objectives

Our key questions include:

- What forces drive U.S. consumer culture? How can we account for issues of supply and demand, industrialization and advertising, “necessities” and “luxuries”?
- How is shopping connected to identity formation, especially to ideas about class, race, gender, citizenship, community, and nationalism?
- What have people meant by phrases like “an American standard of living” or “the American dream”?
- What has the role of government been in the realm of consumption, and why?
- How have social movements organized around issues of consumption, and what is gained and lost in structuring such movements around consumer activism?

Answering these questions requires an interdisciplinary study of cultural history and social history, considering issues of labor, marketing, politics, economics, social movements, mass culture, and identity formation in America.

Student Learning Goals

Students will develop a framework for considering the links between production and consumption as well as between economics and culture. Students will investigate consumer-centered social movements, consumerist identity formations, and other topics in consumer cultural history. Students will develop skills in critical thinking, oral and written communication, analysis of primary and secondary sources, and organization and synthesis of evidence.

Required Texts

This course requires four paperback books:

- Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton University Press, 1999)
- Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Signet Classics, 2000; first published 1900)
- Michael Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (Penguin Books, 2006)
- Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (Picador, 2002)

In addition, there is a brief packet containing articles and primary sources. This packet is available at CopyCo, 2438 Chapman Avenue, near the intersection of Chapman Avenue and State College Boulevard.

Assignments

To begin our analysis of consumer culture, every week by Tuesday at 7 pm, post your reaction to that week's readings on our Blackboard online discussion board. You may post either a question for others or an answer to a classmate's question. You must post every week when we have assigned readings, which is 13 weeks of the semester.

During the eighth week of class, a six-page mid-semester research essay is due. You may choose to analyze a single commodity, a set of advertisements, or a campaign of consumer activism. Alternately, you may choose to write a book review of one of the books listed under "Further Reading."

The final exam will be a take-home essay question synthesizing our analysis of consumer culture. Questions for this six-page essay will be distributed during the twelfth week of class. For all these assignments, extensive further guidelines will be provided in class.

Graduate students who enroll in this class will be expected to perform exceptional work and to write two mid-semester essays: one analysis of consumer culture *and* one book review. Due dates will be arranged during the first two weeks of classes. In addition to these essays, graduate students will also make a brief in-class presentation about the book you chose for your book review, informing your classmates about that book's argument and analyzing its connections to course themes.

Grading

Your final grade will consider

	Undergraduates	Graduate Students
Blackboard postings:	2% each, for 26%	2% each, for 26%
Class participation:	15%	5%
Class presentation	(grad students only)	5%
Mid-semester essay:	25%	20%
Book-review essay	(grad students only)	20%
Final exam:	34%	24%

Grades will be calculated using a standard scale. An A+ is 98-100, A is 93-97, A- is 90-92, B+ is 87-89, B is 83-86, B- is 80-82, C+ is 77-79, C is 73-76, C- is 70-72, D+ is 67-69, D is 63-66, D- is 60-62, and F is anything 59 or below.

In assessing essays, an “A” essay is one that responds completely to the assignment and meets four criteria to a very high standard:

- Clear and specific writing that
- thoughtfully analyzes primary sources,
- articulates connections to the course readings,
- and includes your own original ideas.

A “B” essay also does those four things, yet one is not to a high standard. The writing may be vague, repetitive, or overly-general; the primary sources may be shallowly analyzed; the connections to course readings may be skimpy; or the ideas may only reiterate class discussions. A “C” essay lacks a high standard in two areas; C essays are often logically inconsistent. An “F” essay does not respond to the assignment.

Policies

You are responsible for knowing what happens in class. It is impossible to receive an A in class participation if you miss more than one class, and it is also extremely difficult to do well on the other course assignments if you miss our class discussions. If you must be absent from class, get notes from a reliable classmate and then ask me if you have specific questions.

Please keep all graded assignments so that any discrepancies can be easily and fairly straightened out. Plus and minus grades will be used. Late work will be penalized one letter grade for each week late, unless you have made arrangements with me beforehand. Incompletes will be granted only due to exceptional circumstances.

Extra Credit. This course does not include an extra-credit option.

Academic Integrity. Plagiarism – using the words of another author without citing your source – will lead to an F on the assignment and a report to the campus Judicial Affairs Officer.

Disability Accomodation. If you have a disability or special need for which you may be requesting an accommodation, please inform me as well as the Disabled Student Services Office as early as possible in the semester.

Whenever you have questions, I encourage you to talk to me, in class, after class, by email, or in my office hours. I look forward to a thoughtful semester exploring consumer culture in America.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1

Introduction: Sugar and the Complex Forces of Commodification

Week 2

The Consumer Revolution and the American Revolution

T. H. Breen "Baubles of Britain: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," in *Past and Present* 119 (May 1988), available online through our Blackboard page.
T. H. Breen, "Introduction," to *The Marketplace of Revolution* (2004), pages xi-xviii, in course packet.

Week 3

Myths of the American Dream

Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream*, introduction and chapters 1 and 2.
Poem: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ode, Inscribed to William H. Channing" (1840), in course packet

Week 4

The Credit Revolution

Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream*, chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Week 5

Consuming Identities

Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900), chapters 1-11.
Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925), pages 1-34, in course packet.
Labor songs: "Eight Hours" (1880s) and "Bread and Roses" (1912), in course packet

Week 6

The New Deal

Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s," *American Quarterly* (March 1989), available online through Blackboard.
Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: The Experience of Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), chapters 7 and 8, in course packet.

Week 7

The Radical Possibilities of Consumer Culture

Robin Kelley, "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics during World War II," *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (The Free Press, 1994), in course packet.

Week 8

Mid-semester essays due

Week 9

Civil Rights and Consumption

Cheryl Greenberg, "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" (1997), in course packet
Robert E. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York University Press, 1998), chapters 3 and 7, in course packet
Song: Gil Scott Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (1974), in course packet

Week 10

Property Politics

Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, "Kitchen Debate" (1959), in course packet
Becky Nicolaides and Andy Weise, ed.s, *The Suburbs Reader* (Routledge, 2006) excerpts in our course packet

Week 11

Webs of Significance

Michael Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, Introduction and Part One, "Industrial Corn"

Week 12

Brandings

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, introduction and chapters 1-4

Week 13

Privatization

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, chapters 8-11. In class, you will choose one chapter among chapters 12-17 to read and report on for next week

Week 14

Anti-Globalization Movements

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, chapter 18, conclusion, and afterword, plus whichever chapter you selected last week

Week 15

Conclusions: Pinocchio in the Whale

Jean-Christophe Agnew, "Coming Up For Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective" (1993), in our course packet

Week 16

Final exam due by 4 pm

FURTHER READING

This list is intended to help you consider the directions that studies of consumption can take, and to help you choose a book to review for your mid-semester essay. Graduate students are required to write a book review, while undergraduates may choose book-reviewing as one essay-writing option. All students may choose to review another book that is not on this list, with my prior approval, as long as your chosen book is a thoughtful approach to examining the politics of consumer culture in American society.

Belasco, Warren. *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*.

Benson, Susan Porter. *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*

Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*

Cronon, William. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*

De Grazia, Victoria. *Irresistable Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*

Frank, Dana. *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism*

Frank, Thomas. *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*

Glickman, Lawrence. *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*
Hochschild, Arlie. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*
Jacobson, Lisa. *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century*
Johnson, Walter. *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*
Lears, Jackson. *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*
Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*
Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*
Orsi, Robert. *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes*
Peiss, Kathy. *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*
Rosenberg, Emily. *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945*
Serlin, David. *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America*
Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*
Strasser, Susan. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*
Strasser, Susan. *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*
Zakim, Michael. *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860*