

Consumer Culture in American History

Julia Ott

LHIS 3052A/CRN6475

4 Credits

Fall 2011 TTh

66 W. 12th Street, Room 701

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Office Hours: 2:30 to 4:30pm on Wednesdays (please email for an appointment)

Overview:

This course examines how the United States became the quintessential consumer society, where the good life and good political order is defined through consumer abundance and a rising standard of living. The perspective is historical, tracing the origins of consumer culture to the colonial period. The course considers how the institutions and products of a mass-market economy have transformed American culture, ideals, and politics. It explores the ways people of various racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds have used consumption to signal their political demands and to articulate their social identity.

Reading assignments include historical scholarship, critiques and defenses of consumer culture, and theoretical statements. As we proceed through the semester, readings will come to focus on issues around the production and consumption of clothing and fashion, in preparation for students' final independent project.

Class time will be spent in a mixture of activities including brief casual lectures, discussion of assigned texts, films, collaborative visual analysis, presentations of student work, and peer-editing.

Course Goals:

Over the course of the semester, students will attain a historical perspective upon the meanings, significance, and consequences of their daily experiences as consumers – particularly as consumers of clothing and related items of self-adornment.

Students interested in pursuing a major in History will find this course particularly useful. They will gain experience analyzing a wide range of primary evidence: publicly available printed materials, archival collections, objects, images, and interviews.

Major Themes (for reflection in reader responses and class leader presentations):

Many historians contend that over the course of the twentieth century, the United States became the quintessential consumer society, where individuals find meaning and fulfillment in leisure and material abundance, rather than in productive engagements. Today, proponents and opponents of economic globalization wrangle over its costs and benefits, but all agree that the

desires of American consumers lie at the heart of the phenomenon. How new and how modern are commodification and consumer society?

In this course, students will entertain these questions by examining consumer goods, consumer behavior, and American ideas about consumption in a range of historical periods. Major themes include:

- ⌚ What possibilities do consumer goods offer for reshaping everyday life, forging or strengthening social bonds, articulating identities, and asserting political claims?
- ⌚ What new forms of dependency and interdependency are promoted with the circulation of consumer goods?
- ⌚ How does consumption transform the experience of family, faith, citizenship, community, gender, race, ethnicity and politics?
- ⌚ Does consumer culture present obstacles or opportunities for fashioning identities and communities within and across national boundaries?
- ⌚ Does consumer culture impose limitations or possibilities upon society and political change?
- ⌚ How does consumer culture mediate between individuals, corporations, and states?
- ⌚ How does mass consumption alter models of citizenship and theories of political economy?
- ⌚ Should we understand the extension of the mass market as a triumph of individual choice or a means of elite control under modern capitalism? Does viewing the market as a model of social relations threaten or promote economic and political democracy?
- ⌚ What is the relationship between commodity market development, labor systems, and social classes?
- ⌚ How does market segmentation divide, unify, or restructure social and political groupings?
- ⌚ Does thinking of one's self as a consumer compliment or contradict thinking of oneself as a citizen of a particular nation or member of a particular social group?
- ⌚ How do visions of consumer plenty shape visions of political and social modernity and possibility?
- ⌚ Can the earth sustain globalized consumer culture?
- ⌚ Does the spread of consumer culture spell the end of cultural, religious, and linguistic

diversity? Or can consumer goods be employed to preserve local heritage, knowledge, and taste?

- ⌚ How successfully do commodities, consumers, and consumerism open space for interregional and interdisciplinary investigations?

Requirements and Evaluation:

Regular, informed class participation will be critical to success in this course. Please complete all assignments before class and bring the assigned materials.

To help students to focus their reading and pull their thoughts together before class, each student will prepare two reading response essays of 250 words over the course of the semester. Students may choose from any of the assigned books (with the exception of the Glickman reader) and when a book is assigned in two parts, the reading response may focus on the assigned section. Reading responses may be emailed to the instructor before class or handed in at the beginning of class. Students may consider the following (as well as the ‘major themes’ section above) when developing their reader response essays:

- ⌚ Summarize the author’s main argument
- ⌚ Synopsise the change over time traced by the author
- ⌚ Critique the author’s evidence and argument
- ⌚ Contextualize the reading in light of other course material
- ⌚ Pose suggestions for further discussion and clarification in class
- ⌚ Identify areas for further research

Students will produce two papers over the course of the semester. The first paper (4-6 pages) will be an analysis of an object at the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The course will culminate in a second, final original research paper (8-12 pages). Seminar participants will work together to identify and interpret sources for this paper. Further guidelines will follow.

All written work should be in a double spaced, 12 point font format.

Final grades will be computed as follows:

- Reader responses: 20% (10% each)
- Class participation and presentations: 30%
- Paper 1 (4-6 pages): 20%
- Final paper (8-12 pages): 30%

Required Texts:

All books may be obtained at Barnes and Noble (Fifth Ave. at 18th Street) and also may be found on reserve in Fogelman Library.

Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses and Cities* (New York: Random House, 1993)

Lawrence Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999)

Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982)

Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)

Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000)

William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Random House, 1994)

Kathy Peiss, *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011)

All readings marked with an asterix (*) below may be found on-line via e-reserves.

<http://ereserves.newschool.edu/eres/coursepass.aspx?cid=1131>

Password: buy!tn01

Weekly Schedule and Assignments:

Week One

August 30: **Introduction**

September 1: **Consumption and Colonialism**

- ⌚ James Axtell, "The First Consumer Revolution," in ed. Lawrence B. Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, p. 85-99
- ⌚ *Nicholas Noyes, "An Essay Against Periwigs," in ed. John Demos, *Remarkable Providences*, p. 213-220
- ⌚ *"Bill of Wages and Price Legislation (Massachusetts, 1670) in ed. John Demos, *Remarkable Providences*, p. 251-254

Week Two

September 6: **Commodities, Identity and Power (I)**

- ⌚ Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses and Cities* (1993), p. xi-138, 181-203

September 8: **Commodities, Identity and Power (II)**

- ⌚ *Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Hannah Barnard’s Cupboard” (Ch. 3) and “An Unfinished Stocking” (Ch. 11) in *The Age of Homespun* (New York: Knopf, 2001), p. 108-141, 374-412

Week Three

September 13: **A Consumer’s Revolution?**

- ⌚ *T.H. Breen, “’Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* no. 119 (1988), p. 73-104
- ⌚ *“An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America,” *Journal of British Studies* 25 (October 1986):467-499

September 15: **Respectability**

PLEASE NOTE THAT CLASS MEETS TODAY AT 80 FIFTH AVENUE, ROOM 529

- ⌚ Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses and Cities* (1993), p. 207-287, 353-370, 402-447
- ⌚ (TO BE DISTRIBUTED) Jonathan Prown and Richard Miller, “The Rococo, the Grotto and the Philadelphia High Chest,” in ed. Luke Beckerdite, *American Furniture* (1996), p. 105-36

Week Four

September 20: **Confidence**

- ⌚ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 1-90, 152-190

September 22: **Tour of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art**

- ⌚ Class will meet promptly at 2pm at
- ⌚ To prepare for our tour, please visit the Met’s website and select a few items as possible objects for analysis. It is recommended that students choose an item of furniture, serveware, clothing, or personal accessory:

Week Five

September 27: **Class Presentations of Object Analysis**

September 29: **Class does not meet (Rosh Hashanah)**

Week Six

October 4: **Consuming Slaves, Producing Masters**

- 🕒 Walter Johnson, Introduction, Ch. 1-4, 6 & 7 in *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999), p. 1–134, 162-213

October 6: **Peer-editing**

- 🕒 First draft of first paper due in class for peer-editing

Week Seven

October 11: **The Rise of a Mass Market**

- 🕒 William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (1993), p. 1-150
- 🕒 Final draft of first paper due in class

October 13: **Critiques of the Mass Market**

- 🕒 *Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” (from *Capital* vol. 1)
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>
- 🕒 *Thorstein Veblen, selection from “Conspicuous Consumption” (1899) in ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt, *The Consumer Society: A Reader*, p. 187-204
- 🕒 *Annie M. MacLean, “Two Weeks in a Department Store,” (1899) in ed. Neil Harris, *Land of Contrasts, 1880-1901*, p. 72-88

Week Eight

October 18: **Research Tutorial**

October 20: **Out-of-class Shopping Exercise**

Week Nine

October 25: **The Origins of Consumer Politics**

Presentation of shopping exercises

- 🕒 *Lawrence Glickman, “ ‘Buy for the Sake of the Slave:’ Abolition and the Origins of American Consumer Activism,” *American Quarterly* vol. 56 no. 4 (December 2004), p. 889-913
- 🕒 *Kathryn Kish Sklar, “The Consumers’ White Label Campaign of the National Consumers’ League, 1898-1918,” in ed. Susan Strasser et. al, *Getting and Spending*

(1998), p. 17-35

October 27: Selling Modern Beauty

- ⌚ *Kathy Peiss, “Making Faces: The Cosmetic Industry and the Cultural Construction of Gender, 1890-1930” in ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol Dubois, *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U. S. Women’s History*, p. 324-342
- ⌚ *Kathy Peiss, “Charity Girls and City Pleasures” in ed. Kathy Peiss, *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), p. 299-306
- ⌚ *Joan Jacobs Brumberg, “Fasting Girls: The Emerging Ideal of Slenderness in American Culture,” in ed. Linda Kerber and Jane Sherron de Hart, *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 374-382

Week Ten

November 1: Final project consultations

November 3: The 1920s - A (Brand) New Era

- ⌚ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (1993), p. 263-390

Week Eleven

November 8: The Great Depression – A Crisis of Consumption

- ⌚ *Lizabeth Cohen, “The New Deal State and the Making of Citizen Consumers,” in ed. Susan Strasser et. al, *Getting and Spending* (1998), p. 111-125
- ⌚ Cheryl Greenberg, “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” in ed. Lawrence Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 241-273

November 10: Consumers at War

- ⌚ *Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), Ch. 3-6, p. 47-124.

Week Twelve

November 15: Dressing against the Nation

- ⌚ Kathy Peiss, *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011)

November 17: Postwar Consumer Culture – The Golden Age?

- ⌚ *Betty Friedan, “The Sexual Sell (1963)” in ed. Holt and Schor, *The Consumer Society*, p. 26-46
- ⌚ *John Kenneth Galbraith, “The Dependence Effect (1958),” in ed. Holt and Schor, *The Consumer Society*, p. 20-25
- ⌚ * “A Concerned Consumer Asks a Big Businessman About the Price of a Nylon Shirt, 1950” in ed. Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Philip B. Scranton, *Major Problems in American Business History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 379-381
- ⌚ *Lizabeth Cohen, “From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America,” *American Historical Review* (October 1996), p. 1050-1081
- ⌚ Elaine Tyler May, “The Commodity Gap: Consumerism and the Modern Home” in ed. Lawrence Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, 298-315
- ⌚ *Kaori O’Connor, “The Body and the Brand: How Lycra Shaped America,” in ed. Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture and Consumers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 207-227

Week 13

November 22: **Countercultural Consumption?**

- ⌚ Robert Weems, “The Revolution Will Be Marketed: American Corporations and Black Consumers During the 1960s,” in Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, p. 316-325
- ⌚ *William R. Scott, “California Casual: Lifestyle Marketing and Men’s Leisurewear, 1930-1960” in ed. Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture and Consumers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 169-186

Week 14

November 29: **Student Presentations on Postwar Fashion**

December 1: **Student Presentations on Postwar Fashion**

Week 15

December 6: **The Consumption of Cool** Screening: *The Merchants of Cool*

December 8: **Neoliberal Consumption**

- ⌚ Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000) – Introduction, Ch. 1- 6, Ch. 9-11, Ch. 14-15, Ch. 18, Conclusion, Afterword, p. xv-141; 195-275, 421-458

Week 16

December 13: **Final project presentations**

December 15: **Final project presentations**

FINAL PAPER DUE VIA EMAIL BY 11:59PM, TUESDAY DECEMBER 20 – NO EXCEPTIONS

Research Resources:

The following books are on reserve at Fogelman Library:

Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)
Jane Farrell-Beck, *Twentieth Century Dress in the United States* (New York: Fairchild Press, 2007)
John Peacock, *The Complete Fashion Sourcebook* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005)
John Peacock, *Twentieth-Century Fashion: The Complete Sourcebook* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993)

Kellen Design Archives (New School)

<http://library.newschoo.edu/speccoll/kellen/>

http://guides.library.newschoo.edu/content.php?pid=176223&search_terms=kellen

Gimbel Art and Design Library (New School)

<http://library.newschoo.edu/gimbel/>

John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History (including databases of historical advertising images):

<http://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/hartman/>

especially

<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/adaccess/>

Fashion Design History Database

<http://dmc.newschoo.edu:8081/BrowserInsight/BrowserInsight?cmd=select-collection&hold=true&cid=15>

Fashion Plate Collection

<http://content.lib.washington.edu/costumehistweb/index.html>

Website for “Merchants of Cool” (contemporary youth marketing):

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>

Costume Institute (Metropolitan Museum of Art) database:

http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/listview.aspx?page=1&sort=0&sortdir=asc&keyword=&fp=1&dd1=8&dd2=0&vw=1

Adflip (historical advertising)

<http://www.adflip.com/>

Women's Wear Daily On-line Archive (from 1994 to present)

<http://www.wwd.com/>

Other Policies:

1. Tardiness and Failure to Attend Class:

Successful academic inquiry depends upon the students as much as the instructor; tardiness and absence places our collaborative project in jeopardy. Please make every effort to arrive promptly for each and every class. If a student misses or arrives late (by more than 10 minutes), it will count as an absence.

If you miss a class, please try to inform the instructor as soon as possible (preferably in advance) so that we can arrange a useful way to make up the absence.

A total of four unexcused absences will mandate a reduction of the final course grade by one letter grade. Upon a fifth unexcused absence, the student will automatically **fail the course**. Students at risk for failing a course due to inattendance should consult with an academic advisor to discuss options.

Jonathon White, Director of Academic Advising:
Room 120, 64 W. 11th Street
212.229.5100 x2282
whitej@newschool.edu

Absences will be excused only in the following extenuating circumstances:

- Extended illness requiring hospitalization or visit to physician (documentation required)
- Family emergency (with written explanation)
- Observance of religious holiday

2. Late Assignments:

Late work will result in a deduction of half a grade for each day late. Instructor may grant exceptions in the case of documented illness, emergency, or religious holiday.

3. Grading Standards:

Please see attached.

4. Grade appeals:

Students may petition for an academic grade review after they have requested a verbal explanation for the basis of the grade from the instructor. Students have 60 days after the grade was issued to make their appeal according to the steps outlined in the Lang College catalog.

5. Incomplete grade:

An incomplete grade may be granted – at the discretion of the instructor – under unusual and extenuating circumstances. An incomplete entitles the student to an additional four weeks to complete all work for the course. Please see the Lang College Catalog for full information.

6. Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of someone else's work as one's own in all forms of academic endeavor (such as reader responses, essays, papers, theses, examinations, research data, creative projects, etc), intentional or unintentional. Plagiarized material may be derived from a variety of sources, such as books, journals, internet postings, student or faculty papers, etc. This includes the purchase or “outsourcing” of written assignments for a course. A detailed definition of plagiarism in research and writing can be found in the fourth edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, pages 26-29. Procedures concerning allegations of plagiarism and penalties are set forth in the Lang catalog.

7. Statement on Disabilities:

In keeping with the University's policy of providing equal access for students with disabilities, any student requesting accommodations must first meet with Student Disability Services. Jason Luchs or a designee from that office will meet with students requesting accommodations and related services, and if appropriate, provide an Academic Adjustment Notice for the student to provide to his or her instructors.

The instructor is required to review the letter with the student and discuss the accommodations, provided the student brings the letter to the attention of the instructor. This letter is necessary in order for classroom accommodations to be provided.

Student Disability Services is located at 79 Fifth Avenue - 5th Floor. The phone number is (212) 229-5626. Students and faculty are expected to review the Student Disability Services webpage. The webpage can be found at <http://www.newschool.edu/studentaffairs/disability/> and the office is available to answer any questions or concerns.

Other University Resources:

1. Student Health and Counseling Services – www.newschool.edu/student-services
2. New School Libraries Homepage - <http://library.newschool.edu/>
3. University Writing Center
Room 105, 65 W. 11th Street
212.229.5121
www.onlinenewschool.edu/ureserve/uwc