

Sociology 021 Shop 'Til You Drop: The Question of Consumer Society Fall 2006

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Course Description

Throughout the 20th, and now the 21st century, consumerism has increasingly come to dominate American society. Shopping, buying, having, showing and wearing are central aspects of who we are, who we dream of being, how we interact with each other, and how we affect the larger environment. **Shop 'Til You Drop: The Question of Consumer Society** is an overview of contemporary consumer society. It draws on classic sociological texts, as well as recent writings about consumer society. It is interdisciplinary, using material from economics, history and anthropology. It presents many of the key issues and controversies surrounding consumerism by providing opposite points of view and asking students to make up their own minds about issues.

Requirements: Written requirements are an in-class midterm exam (20%), six two-page reaction papers (15%), a 5 page paper (15%), a final examination (30%) and participation in weekly sections (20%). Assignments and discussion questions are posted on the course website.

Readings: The books listed below are available at the BC Bookstore. All books have been put on reserve at O'Neill Library. If an article on the syllabus is not in Schor and Holt, it will typically be on the class website or available on-line.

Required texts:

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed* (Metropolitan Books 2002).

Carl McDaniel and John Gowdy, *Paradise for Sale: A Parable of Nature* (University of California 2000).

Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley: University of California Press)

Juliet Schor and Douglas Holt, *The Consumer Society Reader* (New Press 2000).

Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American* (HarperPerennial 1999)

James Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation* (Columbia 1999).

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Dover 1994).

Recommended text: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Theory of the Social Judgement of Taste* (Harvard 1984).

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism Policy: I take cheating and plagiarism extremely seriously. I have appended portions of the University's academic integrity statement to this syllabus. You are responsible for knowing what that policy is, and how cheating and plagiarism are defined.

Reading List

I. Introduction to Consumer Society (Sept 6)

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods*, ch 1.
James Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, Introduction, pp. 1-17.
Patricia Dalton, "We've Gotta Have It, But We Don't Need It, and It's Consuming Us," *Washington Post Outlook*, November 28, 2004, Page B01.
Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American*, ch 1.

II. Consumption in historical perspective: constructing class, race and gender (September 11, 13)

Bridget T. Hennigan, *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination* (Mississippi 2004), chs. 1-2, pp. 3-43
William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," *Journal of American History* 1(2):319-342 Sept 1984.
Erica Rappaport, "A Husband and His Wife's Dresses: Consumer Credit and the Debtor Family in England, 1864-1914," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed., Victoria de Grazia (California 1996).

III. Consumption and the Reproduction of Class Inequality (September 18, 20, 25)

Film: People Like Us (September 18)

Jennifer Steinhauer, "When the Joneses Wear Jeans," *New York Times*, May 29, 2005.
Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, chs 2, 4, 5.
Pierre Bourdieu, "The Sense of Distinction," in Schor and Holt, pp. 205-211. Douglas Holt, "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?" in Schor and Holt, pp. 212-253.
Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American*, chs, 2-4.
Jim Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, pp. 17-49.

Extra credit reading: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, chs 2,5, plus additional pages, pp. 1-17, 99-175, 260-317

IV. Critiques of Mass Culture: Consumption as Manipulation

A. Corporations Create Demand (September 27)

Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Schor and Holt, pp. 3-19.
John Kenneth Galbraith, "The Dependence Effect," in Schor and Holt, pp. 20-25.

Betty Friedan, "The Sexual Sell," in Schor and Holt, pp. 26-46.
Douglas Holt, "Why Do Brands Matter? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29(1):70-90, June 2002.

Film: The Persuaders (October 2)

B. Contemporary Advertising (October 4, 11)

Robert Goldman and Steve Papson, "Advertising in the Age of Accelerated Meaning," in Schor and Holt, pp. 81-98 and *Sign Wars: The Cluttered Landscape of Advertising*, (New York: Guilford Press 1996), ch 1, pp. 20-54.

Thomas Frank, "Advertising as Cultural Criticism," in Schor and Holt, pp. 374-394.

Malcolm Gladwell, "The Coolhunt," in Schor and Holt, pp. 360-374.

Recommended: Jean Baudrillard, "On the Ideological Genesis of Needs," in Schor and Holt, pp. 57-80.

V. The Active Consumer (October 16, 18)

Jim Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, chs. 1, 7, 8 pp. 17-49, 233-286.

Michael Schudson, "Delectable Materialism: Were the Critics of Consumer Culture Wrong All Along?" *The American Prospect*, Spring 1991:26-35.

Thomas O'Guinn, "Touching Greatness: The Central Midwest Barry Manilow Fan Club," in Schor and Holt, pp. 156-169.

Henry Giroux, *Textual Poachers*, ch 1.

VI. Topics in Contemporary Consumer Culture

A. From Slow to Fast—the commodification of food (October 23, 25, 30)

Susan Bordo, "Hunger as Ideology," in Schor and Holt, pp. 99-114.

Craig Lambert, "The Way We Eat Now," *Harvard Magazine*, May-June 2004.

Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, ch 4. [?]

Mark Floegel, "The Dirt on Factory Farms: Environmental and Consumer Impacts of Confined Animal Feeding Operations," *Multinational Monitor*, July/August 2000, Volume 7&8: 1-12.

Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest* (South End Press 2000), pp. 3-35.

Frances Moore Lappé and Anna Lappé, *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet* (New York: Putnam) 2001, chs. 1-2, pp.13-62.

Michele Simon, "Battling Big Food in Schools," from *Appetite for Profit*, ch 10. available at informedeating.org/newbook/newbook.htm.

November 1, 2006 IN CLASS MIDTERM

B. Romance and its Commodities (November 6)

Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2003, chs 2, 5, pp. 25-54, 105-133.
Jane Perlez and Kirk Johnson, "The Cost of Gold," *The New York Times*, Monday 24 October 2005, A1.

C. Fashion (November 8)

April Witt, "Acquiring Minds: Inside America's All-Consuming Passion," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2003, page W14.

Juliet Schor, "Cleaning the Closet: Toward a New Ethic of Fashion," in Juliet Schor and Betsy Taylor, *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the 21st Century* (Boston: Beacon Press).

Recommended: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, pp. 177-225.

Georg Simmel, "On Fashion," *American Journal of Sociology* 62:54-58, 1957.

VII. Global Production and Consumption (November 13, 15)

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, ch. 9, pp 195-229 (Picador Books 1999)

Online reading assignment: National Labor Committee website nlcnet.org

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*.

VIII. Consumption and the Environment (November 20, 22, 27)

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005, "Preface: Living Beyond Our Means: Natural Assets and Human Well-Being," pp. 1-31.

Carl McDaniel and John Gowdy, *Paradise for Sale: A Parable of Nature* (University of California 2000).

Online reading assignment: ecotippingpoints.com

IX. Alternatives to Consumer Culture (November 29, December 4,6)

Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press) 2002, chs. 1-2, pp. 1-22.

Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American*, ch 5-6.

Bill McDonough and Michael Braungart, "The Extravagant Gesture" in Juliet Schor and Betsy Taylor, *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the 21st Century* (Boston: Beacon Press).

Kalle Lasn, "Culture Jamming," Schor and Holt pp. 412-430.

Judy Wicks, "Good Morning, Beautiful Business," E.F. Schumacher Lecture Series Pamphlet

Online reading assignment: adbusters.org, newdream.org

Sociology 021 and the Core Curriculum

Sociology 021 is a part of the Core Curriculum in Sociology. As such it is designed to address a range of intellectual issues, using a variety of methodologies, and to engage students in particular ways. These are discussed below.

- a) The long-standing questions. Sociology, and intellectual inquiry more generally, have long been preoccupied with a set of big questions. These include the debate over biological versus sociological causality, how cultures and societies evolve, the nature of human agency and its relation to social structures, what constitutes progress and what are the contemporary possibilities for realizing it. This course addresses these, and other similar issues. For example, we will explore whether the highly acquisitive and consumerist society which has evolved in the United States is a product of “human nature,” or social design. We look at the extent to which consumer desire is “produced” by advertising and marketing, or whether it is driven by social competition, or whether it is innate. Our readings delve into the origin of consumer society, and how it evolved from an environment of saving and austerity. We investigate the debate about the spread of Western consumer culture to other societies, and debate the pros and cons of that transformation.
- b) Cultural diversity. This course also considers at consumer society from the point of view of cultural diversity, looking at how class, race, gender, and nation are structured and reproduced by consumer society. These distinctions are absolutely central to the operation of U.S. consumer society. We look at how racial stereotypes and images have become integral to contemporary marketing practices, and how at the same time, the consumer ideology supports a color-blind veneer. We explore the changing relationship between gender and consumer capitalism, and how class has been a persistent feature of this society since the beginning.
- c) Historical perspective. Throughout the course, a historical perspective is included. The course begins with an exploration of the origins of consumer society in the early 20th century. It goes on to consider the 1950s and 60s, another key period, and ends with discussion of contemporary trends.
- d) Methodology. Students are exposed to a variety of methodological approaches and tools. Much of the course is organized around debates (structure versus agency in consumer desire, pros and cons of globalization, etc.) By looking at a variety of points of view we are able to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of various methods of analysis.
- e) Writing component. The course requires not only reading, but also considerable writing. In addition to a mid-term and a final examination which are mainly essay format, students write bi-weekly “diary essays” which incorporate readings and personal experience.
- f) Creating a personal philosophy. Every one of us is a participant our consumer society. Not all of consume consciously, however. A major objective of this course is to get students to think critically and consciously about consumer society and their place in it. Students are forced to reflect on how they consume, how their consumption affects others, the environment, and themselves.

Boston College Academic Integrity Policy and Procedures (excerpted)
Copied from: <http://www.bc.edu/integrity>

The pursuit of knowledge can proceed only when scholars take responsibility and receive credit for their work. Recognition of individual contributions to knowledge and of the intellectual property of others builds trust within the university and encourages the sharing of ideas that is essential to scholarship. Similarly, the educational process requires that individuals present their own ideas and insights for evaluation, critique, and eventual reformulation. Presentation of others' work as one's own is not only intellectual dishonesty, but also undermines the educational process.

Standards: Academic integrity is violated by any dishonest act which is committed in an academic context including, but not restricted to the following:

Cheating is the fraudulent or dishonest presentation of work. Cheating includes but is not limited to:

- * the use or attempted use of unauthorized aids in examinations or other academic exercises submitted for evaluation;
- * fabrication, falsification, or misrepresentation of data, results, sources for papers or reports, or in clinical practice, as in reporting experiments, measurements, statistical analyses, tests, or other studies never performed; manipulating or altering data or other manifestations of research to achieve a desired result; selective reporting, including the deliberate suppression of conflicting or unwanted data;
- * falsification of papers, official records, or reports;
- * copying from another student's work;
- * actions that destroy or alter the work of another student;
- * unauthorized cooperation in completing assignments or during an examination;
- * the use of purchased essays or term papers, or of purchased preparatory research for such papers;
- * submission of the same written work in more than one course without prior written approval from the instructors involved;
- * dishonesty in requests for make-up exams, for extensions of deadlines for submitting papers, and in any other matter relating to a course.

Plagiarism is the deliberate act of taking the words, ideas, data, illustrations, or statements of another person or source, and presenting them as one's own. Each student is responsible for learning and using proper methods of paraphrasing and footnoting, quotation, and other forms of citation, to ensure that the original author, speaker, illustrator, or source of the material used is clearly acknowledged.

Other breaches of academic integrity include:

- * the misrepresentation of one's own or another's identity for academic purposes;
- * the misrepresentation of material facts or circumstances in relation to examinations, papers, or other evaluative activities;
- * the sale of papers, essays, or research for fraudulent use;
- * the alteration or falsification of official University records;
- * the unauthorized use of University academic facilities or equipment, including computer accounts and files;
- * the unauthorized recording, sale, purchase, or use of academic lectures, academic computer software, or other instructional materials;
- * the expropriation or abuse of ideas and preliminary data obtained during the process of editorial or peer review of work submitted to journals, or in proposals for funding by agency panels or by internal University committees;
- * the expropriation and/or inappropriate dissemination of personally-identifying human subject data;
- * the unauthorized removal, mutilation, or deliberate concealment of materials in University libraries, media, or academic resource centers.

Collusion is defined as assistance or an attempt to assist another student in an act of academic dishonesty. Collusion is

distinct from collaborative learning, which may be a valuable component of students' scholarly development. Acceptable levels of collaboration vary in different courses, and students are expected to consult with their instructor if they are uncertain whether their cooperative activities are acceptable.