

Sociology 021 Shop 'Til You Drop: The Question of Consumer Society Fall 2007

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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 six short "diaries" (20%), a take-home midterm (20%), a 5 page paper (20%), a final examination (20%) and participation in weekly sections (20%). Work with a writing tutor (see below) is also required. Assignments and discussion questions are posted on the course website.

Writing Fellows Program: This class is participating in the BC writing fellows program. All students will be assigned a writing tutor. The tutor will work with you on three required assignments (the first diary, the take-home midterm, and the 5 page paper). Students will provide a draft of their assignment by the listed due date, and meet with the tutor to go over the draft before handing in the final version. Due dates for the rough and final drafts are listed on the syllabus.

Readings: The books listed below are available at the BC Bookstore. All books and articles have been put on online reserves at O'Neill Library. If an article on the syllabus is not in Schor and Holt, it will be on the online reserves, which can be accessed directly or through the class website. Some reading assignments are websites, which you can access directly. Readings that are recommended, rather than required, are identified.

Required texts:

Michael T. Klare, *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependency on Imported Petroleum* (Owl Books 2005)

John C. Ryan, *Seven Wonders: Everyday Things for a Healthier Planet* (Sierra Club Books 1999).

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

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

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 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 5)

"Message in a Bottle," Charles Fishman, FastCompany.com, issue 117, July 2007.
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.
James Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, Introduction, pp. 1-17.
Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American*, ch 1. (Introduction)

II. Consumption in historical perspective: constructing class, race and gender (September 10, 12)

Bridget T. Hennigan, *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination*, ch 1, pp. 3-43. ("Pot Calling the Kettle Black")
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 .
Twitchell, ch 7, pp. 233-270.

Recommended: Gary Cross, *All-Consuming Century*, "The Postwar Splurge," (excerpt from Chapter 3) pp. 88-109.
Hennigan, ch 2.

First draft diary #1 due from all students. September 9, 2007

III. Consumption and the Reproduction of Class Inequality (September 17, 19, 24, 26)

Final draft diary #1 due. September 20, 2007

Film: People Like Us (September 19)

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, in Schor and Holt, pp. 187-204.
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. (Communicating with Commodities, Visible Lifestyle and When Spending Becomes You)
Jennifer Steinhauer, "When the Joneses Wear Jeans," *New York Times*, May 29, 2005.

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. Debates about Consumer Culture: Manipulation and Agency

A. Corporations Create Demand (October 1)

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. (can skim from p. 32 to p. 40)

B. The Active Consumer (October 3)

Henry Giroux, *Textual Poachers*, ch 1. (Get a Life!)

Jim Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, chs, 1-2, 8 pp. 17-89, 271-286.

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

Recommended: Juliet B. Schor, "In Defense of Consumer Critique: Re-visiting the Consumption Debates of the 20th Century," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611:16-30, May 2007.

No Class October 8 Columbus Day

C. Contemporary Marketing and Advertising (October 10, 15)

Robert Goldman and Steve Papson, "Advertising in the Age of Accelerated Meaning," in Schor and Holt, pp. 81-98.

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

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

Douglas Holt, "Why Do Brands Matter? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29(1):70-90, June 2002. (Skim pps)

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

[MIDTERM EVALUATIONS/in class]

V. Topics in Contemporary Consumer Culture

A. Romance and its Commodities (October 17)

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. (Rise of the Lavish Wedding and Wedding Weekend)

Jane Perlez and Kirk Johnson, "The Cost of Gold," *The New York Times*, Monday 24 October 2005, A1.

First draft take home midterm due October 19.

B. Fashion (October 22)

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

Twitchell, ch 6, pp. 197-232.

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

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

Final draft take home midterm Due October 29

C. From Slow to Fast—the commodification of food (October 24, 29, 31)

Allison James, "Confections, Concoctions, and Conceptions," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins, pp. 394-405.

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

Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest*, pp. 3-35 (Hijacking, Soy Imperialism).

Frances Moore Lappé and Anna Lappé, *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet*, chs. 1-2, pp.13-62. (Maps of the Mind and Delicious Revolution)

Michael Pollan, "You Are What You Grow," *New York Times Magazine*, April 22, 2007.

Short films: The Meatrix I, II, III/2

Website reading: themeatrix.com

VI. Consumption and Politics: The Oil Economy (November 5,7)

Amy Best, *Fast Cars, Cool Rides*, Introduction and ch 1, pp. 1-55. (Introduction and Cruising Slow and Low)

Michael Klare, *Blood and Oil*, chs 1, 2 (skim), 3, 4.

VII. Global Production and Consumption (November 12,14)

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, ch. 9, pp 195-229, (Discarded Factory)

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*. Ch 1 (intro), 3 (Selling in Minnesota) and Evaluation

Website reading: National Labor Committee nlcnet.org

First draft paper due November 16.

VII. Consumption and the Environment (November 19, 21,26,28)

Living Planet Report, (World Wildlife Fund) 2006, pp 4-19.

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

John Ryan, *Seven Wonders*, pp.3-68.

Film: The Ecological Footprint

Paper final draft due November 30.

IX. Alternatives to Consumer Culture (December 3,5)

Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism*, 2002, chs. 1-2, pp. 1-22. (Mixed Messages)

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

Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy*, ch 4 "The Wealth of Communities," pp. 128-176.

Website reading assignments: 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.