

**Sociology 021 Shop 'Til You Drop: The Question of Consumer Society**  
Fall 2009

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**Course Description:** Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>, and now the 21<sup>st</sup> century, consumerism increasingly came to dominate American society. Shopping, buying, having, showing and wearing became central aspects of who we are, who we dream of being, how we interact with each other, and how we affect the larger environment. After years of runaway spending, the economic collapse of 2008 led to a dramatic fall in consumer spending, and widespread questioning about whether the era of consumerism had ended.

**Shop 'Til You Drop: The Question of Consumer Society** interprets these developments through the lens of theory and analysis. 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 midterm (25%), a final examination (35%) and participation in weekly sections (20%). Assignments and discussion questions are posted on the course website. Written assignments will be submitted electronically. The course website is available at: [cms.bc.edu](http://cms.bc.edu).

**Readings:** The books listed below are available at the BC Bookstore. Books and articles are on reserve at O'Neill Library, and the course reserves can be accessed through the class website. All article are also posted on the class website. A few reading assignments involve browsing websites.

**Required texts:**

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

Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (Holt 2008)

Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago 1998)

**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 Culture (September 9-16)**

#### **A. Perspectives on Consumer Society (September 9)**

James Twitchell, "Three Cheers for Materialism," in Schor and Holt.

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.

Charles Fishman, "Message in a Bottle," *FastCompany.com*, issue 117, July 2007.

McKibben, *Deep Economy*, ch 1.

#### **B. Boom and Bust? (September 14,16)**

Juliet Schor, *Plenitude*, ch 2 (first half, up to Planetary Eco-cide).

Shaila Dewan, "Conspicuous Consumption: A Casualty of Recession," *New York Times*, March 10, 2009.

The Context Group, "Grounding the American Dream: A Cultural Study of the Future of Consumerism in a Changing Economy," 2008.

Matthew Ruben, "Forgive Us Our Trespasses: The Rise of Consumer Debt in Modern America," available at <http://www.csa.com/discoveryguides/debt/review.php>.

Diary #1. Due September 11. What Kind of Consumer are You?

### **II. The emergence of consumer society: constructing race and gender (September 21-23)**

#### **A. Race and the structuring of consumption (September 21)**

Douglas and Isherwood, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ch 1., pp. 36-47. ("The Uses of Goods")

Bridget T. Heneghan, *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination*, ch 1. ("Pot Calling the Kettle Black")

#### **B. Gender and the development of consumer culture (September 23)**

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.

William Leach, *Land of Desire*, ch 1.

Gary Cross, *All-Consuming Century*, “The Postwar Splurge,” (excerpt from Chapter 3) pp. 88-109.

### **III. Consumption and the Reproduction of Class Inequality (September 28-October 7)**

**Film: People Like Us (September 28) [Yom Kippur Holiday]**

#### **A. Classical Treatments of Class and Consumption (September 30, October 5)**

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, in Schor and Holt, pp. 187-204. (September 30)

Pierre Bourdieu, “The Sense of Distinction,” in Schor and Holt, pp. 205-211. (October 5)

Douglas Holt, “Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?” in Schor and Holt, pp. 212-253. (October 5)

#### **B. Does Class Still Matter? (the US case) (October 7)**

Jennifer Steinhauer, “When the Joneses Wear Jeans,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2005.

David Halle, *Inside Culture*, ch 2.

Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American*, chs 2-4. (Communicating with Commodities, Visible Lifestyle and When Spending Becomes You)

Recommended: 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. Advertising, Marketing, and the Debate about Consumer Culture (October 14-Nov 4)**

**No class October 12. [Columbus Day Holiday]**

#### **A. Corporations Create Demand: The view at mid-century (October 14)**

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)

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

## **B. The Active Consumer (October 19)**

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

## **C. Human Nature, Classical Liberalism and The Sovereign Consumer (October 26, 28)**

Geoffrey Miller, *Spent*, ch 1-2.

Juliet Schor, "The New Politics of Consumption," in Schor and Holt.

**MIDTERM. Taken in sections, October 28**

## **D. Contemporary Marketing and Advertising (Nov 2)**

Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, chs 1-4, 11.

## **E. Assessing the Debate (November 4)**

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

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

Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, chs 1-2.

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

## **VI. The Emergence of a Global Consumer Class (November 9,11)**

Norman Myers and Jennifer Kent, 2004, *The New Consumers: The Influence of Affluence on the Environment*, chs 1,3.

Mazzarella, William (2003), *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*, chs. 7-8.

Tuba Üstüner and Douglas Holt, "Toward a Theory of Status Consumption in Less Developed Countries," unpublished paper.

## **VII. Consumption and the Environment (November 23-December 2)**

### **A. Ecological Impacts of Consumption**

Schor *Plenitude*, ch 2 (second half, beginning with Planetary Eco-cide).

World Wildlife Fund, *Living Planet Report*, 2008.

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

Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy*, ch. 2

**Video assignment:** "The Story of Stuff." watch at <http://www.storyofstuff.com/index.html>

## **VIII. Alternatives to Consumerism (December 7-9)**

### **A. Economic Transformation: A Sustainable Economy (December 7)**

Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy*, chs. 3-5.

### **B. Consumption with a Conscience (December 9)**

John Connolly and Andrea Prothero, "Green Consumerism: Life Politics, Risks and Contradictions," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(1): 117-145.

**Website reading assignments:** [adbusters.org](http://adbusters.org), [newdream.org](http://newdream.org), <http://www.goodguide.com/>

## 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 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.