Course Objectives and Requirements

This course is designed to expose and train graduate students in the sociology of consumption and to analyze the contemporary contradictions and backlash movements in consumer culture. As such the major emphasis is on the literature in sociology, but the reading list also includes authors from related disciplines such as history, cultural studies and anthropology. Although consumption has been studied for more than a century, in the 1980s, the literature exploded, in a variety of areas, and from a number of fields. It is now large, and includes studies of the ways in which people consume media, food, cultural products, clothing and fashion, vehicles, technology, celebrity, etc. Originally the literature centered on the critiques of writers such as Marx, Veblen, Simmel, and the Frankfort school. It has since moved on to consider issues such as the ways in which consumption structures and reproduces social difference, the role of consumer practices in the constitution of culture and personal identity, how consumption becomes a site of sub-cultural resistance, the role of consumption in modernity and post-modernity, and so forth. These theoretical perspectives form the structure of the course.

In sociology, the journal *Theory, Culture and Society* was an early outlet for the revival of the study of consumption, more recently the *Journal of Consumer Culture* has emerged. Over the last 20 years, *The Journal of Consumer Research* has also carried many articles of strong interest to sociologists. For those of you planning to do a field in the sociology of consumption, I suggest you begin reading the *JCC* on a regular basis, and begin familiarizing yourself with back issues of the other two.

There are three requirements for the class. The first is to keep up with the weekly reading assignments. I have tried to keep weekly assignments reasonable, but there is quite a bit of reading. Each week, I will go over the next week's reading in class, to apportion readings for units that cover two weeks and to keep the load manageable. In some cases, if I have not provided page numbers for books, I give those the week before we meet. The purpose of the large recommended list is to provide you with a larger bibliography in the field. This is something you can draw on if you go on to do a field exam in consumption.

The class will be run as lecture/discussion. I will come each week with a lecture, but I expect that a good portion of the class will be discussion. In a graduate seminar, everyone who participates is expected to take responsibility for critically digesting the readings and talking about them. Depending on how the class discussions go, I may also ask for weekly response papers to the reading, or provide discussion questions in advance.
The second requirement is a final paper of approximately 20 pages. For most of you, this paper should entail doing at least some primary research. The paper will be due on the first day of exams, but there will be intermediate deadlines along the way. For those of you who have a long term interest in this topic, you should think of this paper as a future journal article, or even the start of a dissertation topic. I urge you to start thinking about a topic as soon as possible, and to consider this paper a serious piece of work. We will discuss human subjects issues and IRB approval for projects in class.

Third, you will be asked to write a book review of one recent major sociological book on consumption. I will point out good candidates from the recommended readings list.

**Booklist.**

The books below should be available at the BC bookstore under this course number. In cases where the readings are not included in the books below, they are either available on-line at the O'Neill course reserves or they are journals, available online. I have pdfs of many of the journal articles and will send them to you and/or post them on the course website. For those of you with limited financial resources for purchasing books, I have extra copies of some of these available and would be happy to lend them to you.

Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford 1991)  
Reading List

Part I. Consumption Theory

September 14 Theory Introduction

Don Slater, Consumer Culture and Modernity, chs 1, 3.

September 21 Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective: Gender and Race

Bridget T. Hehnagan, Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination (Mississippi 2004), chs 1-2, pp. 3-85.
Anne McClintock, 1995, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest, (Routledge) ch 5, pp. 207-231.

Recommended on introduction:
Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, The World of Goods (Routledge 1996)
Daniel Miller, Acknowledging Consumption.
Lawrence Glickman, Consumer Society in American History: A Reader (Cornell University Press 1999).
recommended on race and gender:
Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, “Alienation, Hope, and Transcendence: Determinism or Determination?” in *Nike Culture*, 94-117.

**September 28 Production-Oriented Critiques of Consumer Culture and the Agency-Manipulation Debate [Yom Kippur Holiday. Class will be re-scheduled]**

Slater, chs. 2,4.

Recommended:


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October 5 Symbolic Consumption, Advertising and the Post-Modern Consumer


Frederick Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* #146, 1984.


Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (California 1993).


Noam Chomsky, *Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (South End Press 1989)

**October 19 and 26 Sociological Critiques: Class**

Slater, ch 6.

Recommended:
Grant McCracken, “Ever Dearer in Our Thoughts: Patina and the Representation of Status before and after the Eighteenth Century,” *Culture and Consumption*, (Indiana 1990) ch 2, pp. 31-43.
November 2 Political Economy and the New Middle Classes


(review Holt “Does Cultural Capital?”)

recommended:


November 9 Consuming in Late and Post-Modernity: Identity, celebrity, culture, and community and self


Recommended:


Joshua Gamson, Claims to Fame.


November 16 The Global Consumer Culture


recommended:

Ulf Hannerz, Transnational Connections (Routledge 1996).

David Howes, Cross Cultural Consumption, (Routledge 1996).


Part II. The crisis of contemporary consumer culture


November 16 The 60s counter-culture and the contemporary cultural critique


recommended:

November 23 Ecological Crisis and the Sustainability Movement


recommended:  

December 30 The Alternative Food Movement


recommended:  
December 7 Political Consumerism: Ethical Consumption and the Movement for Consumer Activism


recommended:

John Brewer and Frank Trentmann, eds., 2006 *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives* (New York: Berg)

Kate Soper and Frank Trentmann, eds., 2008, *Citizenship and Consumption* (Palgrave MacMillan)


