SC 560 Consumption and Sustainability, Spring 2011
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Course Content and Objectives: This course addresses the role of consumption in achieving sustainability, considering challenges such as the scale of consumption in the global north, the spread of consumer culture globally, and the role of particular highly damaging goods and services. The sub-text of much of the discussion to date has been about how difficult it is to affect the trajectory and composition of consumption. However, a look at the historical path of consumer cultures reveals that they are dynamic, multi-faceted, and complex entities.

For the most part, sociologists and anthropologists who study consumption as a cultural phenomenon have played a limited role in discussions about sustainability, which has been more rooted in design and engineering approaches. We will look at consumption and sustainability primarily from a socio-cultural perspective, bringing foundational theories of consumption and consumer culture into dialog with the contemporary sustainability literature. Situating the challenge of sustainability in a socio-cultural perspective expands our understanding of how and why consumption cultures change and where the points of contradiction are located. The second half of the course considers ecologically significant cases (food, energy, and lifestyle) and the complex politics of sustainable consumption. The objective of the course is to develop basic fluency in the rapidly growing field of sustainable consumption, with an emphasis on underlying paradigms and theoretical approaches. Students will develop a strong analytic context from which to develop expertise as well as understand and evaluate the growing literature and applied activity in this field.

There is rapidly expanding non-academic interest in this field, with many resources available on the internet. I suggest you make yourself familiar with them, by surfing, getting on listserves, and the like. Richard Wilk’s listserv is one I highly recommend. Bringing popular resources to the attention of the class will be something we can all do to enhance the educational experience this semester.
**Requirements:** Weekly reading, one book (or article review, due February 18), one 20 page paper (due May 3). Alternative requirements will be discussed during the first class.

**Readings and Texts:** I have ordered six books for the class. Other readings will be available electronically.


**Reading List**

**I. Introduction: The Challenge of Sustainable Consumption (2 weeks)**

**A. Overview of Sustainable Consumption January 18**


**B. Setting the Stage: Political Controversies about “Green Consumption” January 25**

II. Understanding Consumer Culture: Socio-Cultural Theories (5 weeks)

Consumption as a historically evolving practice, its role as symbol and reproducer of culture. Consumption as cultural communication, reproducer of social difference, inequality, and identity. Particular emphasis on Bourdieu’s theory of taste and distinction and Giddens and Beck on reflexive identity in a risk society.

A. Taste and Distinction Feb 1, Feb 8

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard 1984), chs 1-5. (page numbers and reading guidelines will be given in class).

B. Consumption, Identity and Risk    February 15


C. Ecological Modernization Theory and the Practice Approach     February 22


D. Networks, Connections and the Social Actor March 1 (class to be re-scheduled)


III. Paths to Sustainability: Commodities and Lifestyle Choices (4 weeks)

A. Food March 15


**B. Energy, Carbon and the Debate about Climate Change March 22**


http://www.uea.ac.uk/env/cserge/pub/wp/edm/edm_2007_03.htm


http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=698

**C. Downshifting and the Emergence of Low-Impact Lifestyles March 29**


D. Sharing and the New Collaborative Consumption April 5


IV. The politics of sustainable consumption (3 weeks)

A. The Marriage of Ecology and Social Justice: Fair Trade (April 12)


B. The Politics of “Ethical” Consumption (April 19)


C. Models of cultural change April 26

Alberto Melucci, 1996, Challenging Codes: Collection action in the information age,” chs TBA.
Paul Hawken, Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming, pps. 1-8, 139-167, 168-190.
Colin Beavan, 2009, No Impact Man, ch 1, (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux), pp. 3-17.

V. Systemic Solutions: Greening the North May 3

Wolfgang Sachs, Reinhard Loske and Manfred Linz et al, Greening the North: A Post-Industrial Blueprint for Ecology and Equity, chs TBA.