Sociology 771 Understanding Consumer Society
Spring 2012
McGuinn Hall 400

Juliet Schor  (schorj@bc.edu)
Office address: 519 McGuinn, tel: 552-4056
Office hours: Tuesday 1:30-3 and by appointment

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 trends 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 most weeks 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 understanding, critically digesting and talking about the readings. To facilitate this, we will set up a site onto which you will be expected to make some comments in advance of the class. That helps us jump right into conversation, makes sure that everyone is participating, and allows us all to prepare for the conversation. You are expected to read these submissions before coming to class.
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, with 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 two book reviews of recent sociological books on consumption. I will point out good candidates from the recommended readings list. In past years, students who have chosen recently published books have been able to get their reviews published. You may write on one (but not two) of the recently published books we are reading for class.

**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)
Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections* (Routledge 1996),
Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape,* (Taylor and Francis 2009)
Michèle Lamont, *Money, Morals and Manners,* (Chicago 1992)
Rachel Sherman, *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels* (University of California 2007)
Reading List

Part I. Consumption Theory

January 17 Introduction: Situating Consumption within Social Theory and History

Recommended:
Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (Sage 2007)

January 24 Anthropological Approaches to Consumption


Recommended: Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods*

January 31 Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective: Gender and Race

Recommended:
Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, “Alienation, Hope, and Transcendence: Determinism or Determination?” in *Nike Culture*, 94-117.

**February 7 Production-Oriented Critiques of Consumer Culture and the Agency-Manipulation Debate**


Recommended:


**February 14, 21 and 28 Sociological Critiques: Class**


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.


III. Consuming in Post-Modernity

**March 13 Advertising and the Post-Modern Consumer**

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


Recommended:

Baudrillard, Jean, *Selected Writings*
Daniel Boorstin, The Image.
Mike Featherstone, Consumer Culture and Post-Modernism (Sage 1991).
Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight (California 1993).
Stuart Ewen, All Consuming Images (Basic Books 1988).
Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, Nike Culture (Sage 1998).
Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, (Pantheon 2002).
Noam Chomsky, Thought Control in Democratic Societies (South End Press 1989)

March 20 Identity and narratives of the self

Anthony Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. chs. 1,3,6.

Recommended:
Russell Belk, “Possessions and the Extended Self,” Journal of Consumer Research,
March 27 Contemporary Practices of Distinction

Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape, chs.

April 3 Consuming Emotions

Arlie Hochschild, The Managed Heart, ch 1, pp. 3-23.
Millian Kang, The Managed Hand: Race, Gender and the Body in Beauty Service Work, chs.

Recommended:
Arlie Hochschild, 2003, The Commercialization of Intimate Life (California)
Eva Illouz, 2008, Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help (California).

April 10 17 The Global Consumer Culture


Recommended:
David Howes, Cross Cultural Consumption, (Routledge 1996).
Jean and John Comaroff, 2009, Ethnicity, Inc.
Robert Foster, Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption, and Media in Papua New Guinea, (Indiana University Press 2002).
Juliet Schor, “Is the Mouse Eating the World?” (unpublished)

April 24 Subcultural Consumption


Recommended:

**May 1 Producing Consumption**

Rachel Sherman, *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels*. 