

CONSUMPTION

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OVERVIEW

The goal of this course is to explore the theme of consumption from as many perspectives as possible, understanding that our efforts will not be conclusive. Literature about consumption dates back at least to the Enlightenment, but understandings of consumption and analyses of its consequences vary greatly. This is, in part, because one may use consumption as an organizing theme to frame assertions about culture, politics, selfhood and identity, economics, psychology, time/space, history, the future, etc. These assertions are anchored in different 'truths' that are usually informed by the writer's discipline.

The course is divided into three parts. We start with an historical overview, looking at key early texts that dealt with production, consumption, materialism, commodities and commodification, consumer culture, and social change. This includes writings by Marx, Locke, Weber, Simmel, and Veblen. The second section explores more contemporary work by Williams, Appadurai, Campbell, Bourdieu, Miller, and Baudrillard. The third section of the semester includes texts that stand in more specific spatial and/or temporal locations. It is here that we will look at exchange theories, population stress and global power imbalances, market forces, environmental consequences, advertising, ethnography, and the end result of much material consumption that is seldom considered: garbage.

The course is founded on the assumptions and approaches of social science, especially anthropology; many of the texts are either by anthropologists or have been central to anthropological considerations of consumption, exchange, and material culture. This does not mean that students must be oriented to social science. Part of the first class will be devoted to an assessment of student interest. If anyone has a particular curiosity about consumption that she or he wishes to explore, we will try to make room for it as the semester unfolds. Class presentations are an integral part of the semester's second half (though they will only be part of a class session, never all of it), and students are urged to use them to blend their individual interests with the texts we'll be reading. For instance, we will not be considering consumption through literary analysis, but that doesn't mean someone interested in such a perspective can't pursue it.

TEXTS

The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective; Appadurai, ed.

Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women Commodification, Consumption, & Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe; Burke

The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism; Colin Campbell

The World of Goods; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1996 ed.)

The Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America; Lears

The Philosophy of Money; Georg Simmel

The Theory of the Leisure Class; Thorstein Veblen

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism; Max Weber

Problems in Materialism and Culture; Williams

Selected Writings and For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign; Baudrillard

Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies; Miller

ASSIGNMENTS

- One 5 - 7 page response paper
- The archaeology of a commodity. This requires you to trace an object of your choice from its market presentation back to its constituent elements.
- One class presentation, solo or with a partner, based on your commodity archaeology
- One 15 - 20 page final research paper.
- Weekly participation in the class newsgroup [an on-line bulletin board]

The semester includes a trip to Freshkills, New York City's last landfill and now most ambitious park project. We'll decide on the date once the class convenes.

SCHEDULE

1. January 26 / Introduction to class themes, goals, responsibilities. Assessment of class interest; scheduling of presentations.

PART I: HISTORICAL DEBATES

2. February 2 / Marx: from *Capital*, edited by Max Eastman (Chapters 1 - 10)

3. February 9 / Locke: 'On Property.'
Weber: *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

4. February 16 / Simmel: *The Philosophy of Money*, selected chapters
Veblen: *The Theory of the Leisure Class*; Chapters I - V.
Steiner: "Veblen Revised in the Light of Counter-Snobbery"

Response Paper Due

PART II: CONTEMPORARY CONUNDRAS

5. February 23 / Williams: 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory'
'Means of Communication as Means of Production'
Baudrillard: 'Consumer Society'
'For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign'
'The Ideological Genesis of Needs'
'Beyond Use Value'
Miller: Selected essays
6. March 2 / Appadurai: "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value"
Kopytoff: "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process"
(Both readings are from *The Social Life of Things*)
7. March 9 / Campbell: *The Romantic Ethic...*
Clarke: Consumption and the City

Commodity Archaeology Topic Due

March 16 / Spring Break

PART III: SPECIFIC FRAMES OF REFERENCE

8. March 23 / An Anthropological Overview

Douglass and Isherwood: *World of Goods*Bourdieu - from *Distinction* and *Outline of a Theory of Practice*

9. March 30 / Population

Sagoff: 'Do We Consume Too Much?'

Furedi: *Population and Development*Mazur: *Beyond the Numbers : A Reader on Population and Consumption*

10. April 6 / Ethnography

Burke: *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*

11. April 13 / Advertising

Lears: *Fables of Abundance*Williams: 'Advertising: The Magic System,' in *Problems*

Baudrillard: 'The System of Objects'

Commodity Archaeology Paper Due

12. April 20 / Exchange Theory

Baudrillard: 'Concerning the Fulfillment of Desire...' in *Critique*

Simmel: 'Exchange.'

Weiner: Chapter 1 and 2

Mauss: *The Gift*

13. April 27 / Garbage

Rathje: *Rubbish!*Thompson: *Rubbish Theory*Wolf & Harris: *Too Good to Throw Away*

14. May 4 / Conclusion

14. May 11 / Final Paper Due