This is the course guide from when the paper was last taught, in 2017-2018. I will slightly revise the reading list for 2020-2021 but the bulk of the readings and the weekly themes will remain the same.

**Paper 26: Consumption and Consumer Culture in the United States**

This paper will investigate consumption in the United States from the Revolution to the present day. We will study the histories of consumer goods that dominated the trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that are inseparable from the birth of the United States, such as sugar, tobacco, tea, and cotton. We will think about the ways that Americans used goods to convey their own distinction and refinement, thereby constructing class difference. Americans came to think of shopping as a woman’s activity in the nineteenth-century United States, and consumer goods began to play central roles in defining and policing not only gender norms but also those of race, ethnicity, and sexuality. As the United States’ formal and informal empire expanded at the beginning of the twentieth century, Americans consumed a widening array of products from abroad and exported more goods themselves. Fordist mass production and consumption, meanwhile, helped to usher in an era of unprecedented prosperity and put in place a middle-class “standard of living” that became a source of national pride and even a weapon in the Cold War.

Critics have asserted that a consumer society is leading to the commodification of everything: food, water, emotion, religion, relationships. And no one can deny that a consumer economy has been disastrous for the environment—a story that historians are just beginning to tell. Students of this paper will consider Americans’ attempts to protest or outright reject the consumer society around them and to use (even subvert) it for their own ends.

This paper will consider questions such as: How good was “the good life” pictured by advertisements and materially achieved by so many Americans? Did the advent of the consuming household liberate or further confine women? Did consumer goods make for rich material with which to fashion individual and group identities, or did they create an impoverished understanding of human desire and potential? To what degree has it been possible to criticize and even opt out of consumer culture, or does consumerism simply co-opt its critics? How have global flows of production and consumption shaped individual lives, national identity, and international relations?

We will read theorists from Marx and Veblen to Adorno and Bourdieu to help us define and frame consumer culture. Class meetings will also incorporate primary sources—not only written texts but also advertisements, catalogs, film, and consumer products themselves—so that we may practice the varying methods that historians have used to reconstruct and understand consumer culture.

The paper will be taught in seven classes in Michaelmas term, seven in Lent term, and one revision class in Easter term. Class meetings will be conducted as group discussions, with a set of required common readings supplemented by a longer reading list that students will draw from for supervision essays. Each student will receive four to five supervisions. Dr. Julia Guarneri is the course convenor and will provide the majority of supervisions; a few additional members of the department may supervise on topics that align with their expertise.
The subjects of weeks 2-13 will all serve as supervision topics. Students have the option of three additional topics for supervisions:

- Consumption and the environment
- Consumer activism
- Gender and consumption

These topics do not have reading lists of their own; instead, relevant readings on the list for any week can be assembled for a supervision essay.

Every student will have four supervisions, with an optional fifth revision supervision if they choose. Group size will range from one to three.

Over the course of Michaelmas and Lent, every student will be responsible for one in-class presentation on a reading (or two, if they are short) that is relevant to that week’s topic.

**Overviews:**


**Michaelmas term**

**Week 1 - Definitions and theories of consumption**

- Raymond Williams, “Consumer,” from *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), 2 pages
- Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944)
- Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aesthetic Sense as the Sense of Distinction” (1979)
- Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret”
- Guy DeBord, Thesis 17 from *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)

**Week 2 - Consumption and commodities in the Atlantic world**

Required reading:


And please choose one of the readings below:

chapters 3 and 4.


**Week 3 - Women consumers: morality and activism**

Required reading:


Further reading:


**Week 4 – Reading week**

**Week 5 - Class, luxury, refinement, and distinction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**

Required reading:


Further reading:

• Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (1992), the rest!
• Kenneth L. Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (1992)
• Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)

**Week 6 - Industrial food, industrial landscape**

Required reading:

Further reading:

**Week 7 - Leisure time**

Required reading:

Further reading:
• Daniel A. Clark, *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines and Middle-Class Manhood,*
1890-1915 (2010).

- Jon Kasson, Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century (1978).
- Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920 (1983), chapters 7 + 8.

Week 8 - Labor, wages, and debt

Required reading:

Further reading:
- Susan Porter Benson, Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940 (1986).
- Louis Hyman, Debtor Nation: The History of America in Red Ink (2012).

Lent term

Week 1 - Advertising and the democracy of desire

- Marina Moskowitz, Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America (2003).
Week 2 - Empire and consumerism


Week 3 - Postwar mass consumption and its exclusions

- Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), chapters 1, 2, 9, 10.

Week 4 - Countercultures, including the simple life

• The Whole Earth Catalog, 1970

**Week 5 – reading week**

**Week 6 - Segmented marketing and communities of consumption**

**Week 7 - Global commodity markets**
• Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (2003).
Week 8 - Dilemmas of modern consumerism


