American Cultural History: Selected Topics
Material Culture and Consumer Culture

COURSE GUIDE

History 546

History 546

Fall 2013

Prof. L. Tolbert

Office: MHRA 2109

Hours: by appointment

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*Note that this syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor. Any necessary changes in the syllabus or course schedule will prioritize effectiveness for student learning.

Scope of the Course

Historian Lawrence Glickman asks, “When did the United States become a consumer society? Has it always been one? Were Americans born to shop? Did they learn to do so? Or were they coerced?” These questions could hardly be more relevant as the nation experiences the current crisis of consumer culture. This semester we will explore the new American consumer history, a history that has largely been written in the last two decades.

Since the 1990s, studies of consumer history have revolutionized our understanding of American history. Once considered peripheral, consumption is now understood to be central to major aspects of American history from politics, economics, and religion, to the social history of gender and race. We will explore the evolution of consumer culture in the United States from the so-called “consumer revolution” of the eighteenth century through the development of a mass consumer society in the twentieth century.

This course is designed as an advanced reading seminar focusing on the arguments and methods of historians who study American consumer culture. We will pay particular attention to the contributions of material culture scholars for our understanding of the social, political and economic dynamics that have shaped consumer culture over time. Material culture methodology has been especially valuable for evaluating the way material goods confer rank or status in a social hierarchy, the role of fashion and demand in spurring economic growth and changing manufactures, and the ways in which people can construct their own meanings for objects produced by themselves or others. Essay assignments will require you to evaluate different types of primary source evidence to interpret consumer experience in particular historical contexts.
Learning Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course students will be able to:

- Identify and explain distinctive periods in the development of American consumer culture from the colonial era through the twentieth century in a transatlantic context.
- Contextualize the role of material objects, including the physical contexts of consumption, in the creation of consumer society over time.
- Assess the role of technology in the creation of consumer society over time.
- Evaluate the impact of consumption on groups and individuals in particular historical contexts, paying attention to such factors as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and region.
- Apply the arguments and interpretations from assigned readings to analyze different types of primary source evidence in the context of consumer experience during a particular historical period.
- Compare and contrast central arguments of each reading assignment and synthesize major points of agreement or disagreement among particular authors as the course unfolds.
- Review original scholarship in historiographical context.

Required Readings

**Books:** (available at UNCG Bookstore and on reserve in Jackson Library)


**Journal Articles and Book Chapters:** (available on Bb ereserves, JSTOR, or other journal databases. Use Library Catalog to locate articles not posted on Bb ereserves.)


Robin D. G. Kelley, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk,’” pp. 1400-1408

Natalie Zemon Davis, “Toward Mixtures and Margins,” pp. 1409-1416

T. J. Jackson Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” pp. 1417-1426


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### Evaluation

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*Discussion Board Reading Responses: (10%).*

These assignments will vary in format, length, and purpose from week to week, but will never exceed one page in length. Instructions will be provided in advance of due dates. Formats may include creating a set of inquiry questions about the reading, identifying and comparing authors’ thesis statements, a paragraph connecting the week’s reading to a larger historiographical problem addressed in the course, a short essay evaluating a particular methodology. These assignments are intended to help focus your thoughts before class discussion or reflect on the readings after class discussion and will offer opportunities to practice specific critical thinking skills in a manageable way before you are graded on more formal writing assignments. Discussion Board postings will be graded based on substantive engagement with the assigned reading for the week using the rubric below. This rubric may be updated as the semester unfolds to clarify expectations based on your feedback and questions. See Course Policies section below for late assignment penalty. Some Discussion Board assignments are described in the Course Schedule below. Instructions for additional Discussion Board assignments will be provided as the semester unfolds.

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<th>Discussion Board Rubric</th>
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<td>Description of characteristics for different levels of student performance.</td>
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<td>Score</td>
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**Primary Source Analysis Case Studies (60%):**

Use the assigned readings to evaluate the following primary source documents in appropriate historical context for understanding consumer history of the period. Detailed instructions for the primary source analyses will be provided as the semester unfolds.

Case Study 1: Using Photographs as Historical Evidence, due by noon on October 16.
Case Study 2: Using Advertisements as Historical Evidence, due by 5:00 p.m. on November 15.

**Undergraduates:** Essays should be 6-7 pages, typed and double-spaced. Use Turabian style citations [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html] for all references.

**Graduate Students:** Essays should be 7-10 pages, typed and double-spaced. Use Turabian style citations [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html] for all references.

**Undergraduate Students: Book Review (30%)**

Survey the footnotes and bibliographic essays of the assigned reading to identify a book on a significant topic of consumer history and/or material culture history that interests you. You may study any period of American consumer history addressed in the course. Read your selected book and write a 1000-word review of the book. Book Review selection due by noon on October 23. Discussion Board posting identifying thesis statement + one paragraph about the most important contribution the book makes to the study of consumer history due by noon on November 6. Final book review is due by 5:00 p.m. on December 2.

**Graduate Students: Review Essay (30%)**

Using the book review guidelines for the American Studies journal, *American Quarterly* [http://www.americanquarterly.org/submit/book_reviews.html] develop a review essay that evaluates three books on a subject or theme related to any period of American consumer history. Follow the *American Quarterly* standard for a review of multiple books (no more than 5000 words). Your review should take into account the professional evaluations of at least two different scholars (if possible) in published reviews of the books. A one-page proposal explaining the theme of the review essay including annotated bibliography of the three selected books is due October 23 by noon. Discussion Board posting about historiography of the three books is due by noon on November 6. The final essay is due by 5:00 p.m. on December 2.
Course Policies

Participation and Attendance Policy

Consistent attendance—Attendance is mandatory. This is a seminar, not a traditional lecture course. We will be critically evaluating the content of the readings and practicing the application of analytical skills during each class period. You will not be able to make up for your absences by copying someone else's notes. For this reason, consistent attendance is essential to your learning in this course. I will take attendance at the beginning of every class. You must attend at least two hours of the class period to be counted for full attendance for the class. If the University is closed for snow you will not, of course, be counted absent. If it snows and the University is open, class will be held as scheduled and attendance counts. In the event that I am unable to attend class due to unforeseen circumstances I will distribute an email message and post an announcement to Bb at least two hours (if possible) before class is scheduled to begin. Documentation for absences will not be collected except in cases where an extended absence may be necessary (for example, hospitalization). There will be a 3% reduction of the student's final grade for each absence after the first 2. Beyond even this penalty, a student who seriously neglects attendance and class preparation risks failing the course.

Regular contributions to class discussions—participation is not formally graded as a specific percentage of the final grade but the success of this course for your learning depends on active intellectual engagement with your peers.

Late Assignment Penalty

Meeting deadlines is an essential element of professional behavior. Please note that unless arrangements have been made well in advance of due dates, assignments will be penalized by a 3% reduction in the final assignment grade for every day the assignment is late. Assignments later than one week will not be accepted for credit without an extremely impressive explanation. Using effective quantitative reasoning, your grade average can recover from an F on an individual assignment more successfully than it can recover from a “0”. It is better to turn in an incomplete assignment on time than to turn in nothing at all.

Thorough preparation for class—readings must be completed before class and assignments must be turned in on time, including Discussion Board postings. Failure to submit Discussion Board postings by the deadline will result in 2 points subtracted from your final Discussion Board grade for each skipped Discussion Board assignment. Postings must be complete and must fully address the question for credit. Incomplete assignments will not count for credit.

Electronic Communication

Students are responsible for checking Blackboard and UNCG email on a regular basis. Students are encouraged to utilize email and other forms of digital communication when interacting with the instructor (lctolber@uncg.edu). When using email, students are expected to be professional and courteous, not casual and familiar. Remember that emailing an instructor is not the same as texting your best friend. Keep in mind that you are making an impression with every interaction whether it be in class or online. Present yourself in a professional manner. Students should also remember email is an asynchronous form of communication. Thus, while a prompt response may be desired, it may not always be possible (especially late at night and on weekends). Students should allow at least 24 hours (48 hours on weekends) for a response. That said, the instructor answers emails in the timeliest fashion possible.

Academic Integrity

UNCG considers academic dishonesty to be a serious offense. Dishonest behavior in any form, including cheating, plagiarism, deception of effort, and unauthorized assistance, may result in such sanctions as a failing grade on an assignment or failure in the course depending on the nature of the offense. Students must follow the guidelines of the University Policy on Academic Integrity: http://sa.uncg.edu/handbook/academic-integrity-policy/
Course Schedule

August 22  Introductions

August 28  Discussion Board Assignment due by noon on August 28: Write 3 sentences or questions addressing the following: Identify 3 big questions or historical problems that have engaged consumer historians. I want complete sentences. I want only 3 sentences. I do not want a paragraph. I do not want an essay.

August 29  Historiography and Methodology
Read: [organized in recommended reading order]


September 5  Consumer Revolutions in the Early Modern Era
Read:

September 12  No Class. Discussion Board Assignment due [subject tba]

September 19  American Consumption in the Revolutionary Era
Read:

Jaffee, chapters 1-3, pp. ix-146.

September 26  Part 1: Consumption in a Market Economy
Part 2: Book Review Workshop [Bring Blaszczyk to class]
Read:
Jaffee, chapters 4-epilogue, 147-334
October 3  Using Photographs as Historical Evidence Workshop
Review:
Jaffee chapters 6 and 7
Read:
America’s First Look into the Camera: Daguerreotype Portraits and Views 1839-1864.
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/daghtml/
Mirror Images: Daguerreotypes at the Library of Congress:
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/daghtml/dagpres.html
Secrets of the Dark Chamber Exhibit with primary sources:

October 10  Victorian Consumers
Spaces of Consumption Case Study: The Department Store
Read: [organized in recommended reading order]
Blaszczyk, Part One, chapters 1-3, pp. vii-92.

October 16  Using Photographs as Historical Evidence Case Study Due by noon.

October 17  Spaces of Consumption: The Segregated South
Read:

October 23  Undergraduate Students: Book Review selection due by noon.

October 24  Using Advertisements as Historical Evidence Workshop
Read:
Blaszczyk, Chapter 4: Mr. Advertiser Meets Mrs. Consumer, 116-136.
October 31  Studying Consumption in Industrial Society: Problems and Possibilities
AHR Forum. American Historical Review Vol. 97, No. 5 (Dec. 1992): 1369-1430. The forum consists of the following:
Robin D. G. Kelley, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk,’” pp. 1400-1408
Natalie Zemon Davis, “Toward Mixtures and Margins,” pp. 1409-1416
T. J. Jackson Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” pp. 1417-1426

November 6  Discussion Board Posting Due by noon on November 6: Undergraduates: thesis statement and one paragraph about the most important contribution the book makes to the study of consumer history; Graduates: 1-page essay about key historiographical relationship among the three review essay books.

November 7  Part 1: Book Review Reports
Part 2: Modern America
Read: Błaszezyk, Part Two, chapters 4-6, pp. 93-178.

November 14  Mass Consumer Society in the Postwar Era
Read: [organized in recommended reading order]
Błaszezyk, Part 3, chapters 7-conclusion, pp. 179-275.

November 15  Using Advertisements as Historical Evidence Due by 5:00 p.m.

November 21  Part 1: Supermarkets: Transatlantic Connections
Part 2: Summations and Course Evaluations.
Read: [organized in recommended reading order]

November 28  No Class. Thanksgiving Holiday

December 2  Graduate Students: Final Review Essay Due by 5:00 p.m.
Undergraduate Students: Final Book Review Due by 5:00 p.m.