



American Cultural History: Selected Topics Material Culture and Consumer Culture COURSE GUIDE

History 546

Spring 2009

Prof. L. Tolbert

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Hours: by appointment

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 decade.

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 following aspects of consumer history: 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. Assignments will focus on two kinds of analysis. Unit-based essays require you to apply arguments of specific scholars in each unit to evaluate different types of primary source evidence to interpret consumer experience in particular historical contexts. A final essay will require you to take a big picture approach to the whole semester by synthesizing course readings across all three units to evaluate a particular aspect of American consumer history.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the semester students should be able to demonstrate knowledge and skill development in the following areas.

- Identify and explain distinctive periods in the development of American consumer culture from the colonial era through the twentieth century.
- Contextualize the role of material objects, including the physical contexts of consumption, in the creation of consumer society over time.
- Assess the role of groups, individuals, and processes 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 three 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.

Required Readings

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

Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf, 2003.

Domosh, Mona. *American Commodities in an Age of Empire*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Glickman, Lawrence B., ed. *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

Glickman, Lawrence B. *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Martin, Ann Smart. *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

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

Carrier, James. "Reconciling Personal Commodities and Personal Relations in Industrial Society," *Theory and Society* Vol. 19, No. 5 (October 1990): 579-598.

Clarke, Alison J. "Tupperware: Product as Social Relation." In Martin, Ann Smart and J. Ritchie Garrison. *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field*. Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum. Distributed by University of Tennessee Press, 1997. [ereserves]

Hale, Grace Elizabeth. "For Colored" and "For White": Segregating Consumption in the South," pp. 162-182. In *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*. Edited by Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Bryant Simon. Princeton University Press, 2000. [ereserves]

Leach, William R. "Transformation in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925" *Journal of American History* Vol. 71, No. 2 (1984): 319-342.

Martin, Ann Smart. "Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework." *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 28. No. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1993): 141-157.

Perkins, Elizabeth A. "The Consumer Frontier: Household Consumption in Early Kentucky," *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 486-510.

Roediger, David R. "White Skins, Black Masks: Minstrelsy and White Working Class Formation before the Civil War." In *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991. [ereserves]

Tolbert, Lisa C. "The Aristocracy of the Market Basket: Self-Service Food Shopping in the New South." In *Food Chains*, ed. Roy Rosenzweig and Warren Belasco. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. [posted to Bb]

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. "Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England" *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 55, No. 1. (Jan., 1998), pp. 3-38.

AHR Forum. *American Historical Review* Vol. 97, No. 5 (Dec. 1992): 1369-1430. The forum consists of the following:

Lawrence W. Levine, "[The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences](#)," pp. 1369-1399

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

Lawrence W. Levine, "[Levine Responds](#)," pp. 1427-1430

Evaluation

Final Essay	25%
Primary Source Analyses	75%

Attendance policy and recommendations regarding student class participation for the effectiveness of your learning.

1. Consistent attendance—This class will operate as a seminar and workshop, 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. Attendance policy: **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 preparation risks failing the course. I will take attendance at the beginning of every 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.
2. Thorough preparation for class—Readings must be completed before class and assignments must be turned in on time. **Late 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. It is very important that you make arrangements with me **in advance of the due date** if you will not be able to meet an assignment deadline in the course.
3. Regular contributions to class discussions—The success of this course for your learning depends on active intellectual engagement with your peers. Discussions will take place during every class meeting in both small group exercises and as a whole class and you will have opportunities throughout the semester to develop your oral communication skills.

Primary Source Analysis: (75%)

Use the assigned readings to evaluate the following primary source documents in appropriate historical context for understanding consumer history of the period. Essays should be 5-7 pages, typed and double-spaced. Use Turabian style citations [<http://library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/handouts/turabian.asp>] for all references. Detailed instructions for the primary source analyses will be provided as the semester unfolds.

Unit 1: Probate Inventory (25%), due Feb. 13 by 5:00 p.m.

Unit 2: Trade Cards (25%), due March 6 by 5:00 p.m.

Unit 3: Consumer Magazine (25%), due April 17 by 5:00 p.m.

Final Essay: Consumer Culture in Historical and Historiographical Perspective (25%)

due April 30 by 3:30 p.m.

Focusing on a particular theme, use a minimum of one reading from each of the three units to evaluate consumer history from the colonial era through the twentieth century. See possible themes on pp. 11-13 in the Glickman reader. Your essay should address important points of agreement or disagreement among scholars. Essays should be 10-15 pages, typed and double-spaced. Use Turabian style citations [<http://library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/handouts/turabian.asp>] for all references.

[*Nb: distinct requirements for graduate students are not identified in the syllabus because no graduate students signed up for HIS 546 in Spring 2009.]



Course Schedule

January 20 Introductions

Unit 1: Consumer Revolutions in Early America: Atlantic Economies and Backcountry Stores

January 22 Chronology, Methodology, and Definitions

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

Introduction: Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History (Glickman)

Consumer (Williams)

Martin, Ann Smart. "Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture

Framework. *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 28. No. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1993): 141-157.

January 27 Introduction to Probate Inventories

Read:

Gunston Hall Room Use Study:

<http://www.gunstonhall.org/architecture/roomuse/methodology.html> Chapter 1:

Methodology

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/interpret.php>: Review all of the materials in Probing the Past

January 29 The First Consumer Revolution

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

The First Consumer Revolution (Axtell)

Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought (Appleby)

February 3 Virginia Consumers

Read:

Martin, Ann Smart. *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. (pp. 1-93)

February 5 Applications: Virginia Consumers and Probate Inventories

Read:

Martin, Ann Smart. *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. (pp. 94-204)

February 10 Consumer Revolutions?

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution (Breen)

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. "Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England" *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 55, No. 1. (Jan., 1998), pp. 3-38.

February 12 Probate Inventory Workshop

February 13 Probate Inventory Analysis due by 5:00 p.m. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu.

Unit 2: Nineteenth-Century Consumers: From a Market Economy to an Industrial System

February 17 Antebellum Consumers

Read:

Perkins, Elizabeth A. "The Consumer Frontier: Household Consumption in Early Kentucky," *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 486-510.

Roediger, David R. "White Skins, Black Masks: Minstrelsy and White Working Class Formation before the Civil War." In *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991. [ereserves]

February 19 Primary Source Perspectives: P. T. Barnum and Alexis de Tocqueville on American Consumers

Read:

Selections from Tocqueville's, *Democracy in America*; and Barnum's Autobiography, *Struggles and Triumphs*, Ch. 5, "My Start as a Showman" and Ch. 8, "The American Museum" [posted to the assignments section of Bb]

February 24 Introduction to Trade Cards

February 26 Consumerism as Imperialism

Read:

Domosh, Mona. *American Commodities in an Age of Empire*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

March 3 American Consumers: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity at the Turn of the Century

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

From Scarcity to Abundance: The Immigrant as Consumer (Heinze)

Consuming Brotherhood: Men's Culture, Style and Recreation as Consumer Culture, 1880-1930 (Swiencicki)

Leach, William R. "Transformation in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925" *Journal of American History* Vol. 71, No. 2 (1984): 319-342.

March 5 Segregating Consumption

Read:

Grace Elizabeth Hale. "For Colored" and "For White": Segregating Consumption in the South, pp. 162-182. In *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*. Edited by Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Bryant Simon. Princeton University Press, 2000. [ereserves]

Tolbert, Lisa C. "The Aristocracy of the Market Basket: Self-Service Food Shopping in the New South." In *Food Chains*, ed. Roy Rosenzweig and Warren Belasco. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. [posted to Bb]

March 6 Trade Card Analysis due by 5:00 p.m. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu.

March 10/12 ***Spring Break*******

<p style="text-align: center;">Unit 3: Race, Class, Gender and the Making of a Mass Consumer Society in the Twentieth Century</p>
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March 17 Workers and the Making of Consumer Society

Read:

Glickman, Lawrence B. *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

March 19 Creating a Consumer Society: 1920s

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s (Cohen)

Familiar Sounds of Change: Music and the Growth of Mass Culture (Sanchez)

March 24 Crisis of Consumer Society: 1930s

Read:

Lawrence W. Levine, "[The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences](#)," *American Historical Review* Vol. 97, No. 5 (Dec. 1992): pp. 1369-1399.

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

"Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" (Greenberg)

March 26 Challenges of Studying Consumers in Mass Industrial Contexts

Read:

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
Lawrence W. Levine, "[Levine Responds](#)," pp. 1427-1430

March 31 Origins of the Postwar Consumers' Republic

Read:

Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf, 2003. Parts I and II.

April 2 Mass Consumer Society in the Postwar Era

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

The Commodity Gap: Consumerism and the Modern Home (May)

Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf, 2003. Parts III and IV.

April 7 Cultures of Mass Consumption

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

The 'Work' Ethic and 'Leisure' Activity: The Hot Rod in Post-War America
(Moorhouse)

The Revolution Will Be Marketed: American Corporations and Black Consumers during
the 1960s (Weems)

April 9 Interpreting the Meanings of Mass Consumption

Read:

Clarke, Alison J. "Tupperware: Product as Social Relation." In Martin, Ann Smart and J. Ritchie Garrison. *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field*. Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum. Distributed by University of Tennessee Press, 1997. [ereserves]

Carrier, James. "Reconciling Personal Commodities and Personal Relations in Industrial Society," *Theory and Society* Vol. 19, No. 5 (October 1990): 579-598.

April 14 Popular Magazine Workshop

April 16 Consumer Society Since the 1970s

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

All Work and No Play. It Doesn't Pay (Schor)

When High Wage Jobs Are Gone, Who Will Buy What We Make? (Moody)

The Green Consumer (Ekington et. al.)

April 17 Popular Magazine Analysis due by 5:00 p.m. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu

April 21 Critiques of Consumer Culture

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

Delectable Materialism: Second Thoughts on Consumer Culture (Schudson)

The Tyranny of Choice (Waldman)

The Pleasures of Eating (Berry)

April 23 New Paradigms: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective

Read:

from *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*:

Coming Up for Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective (Agnew)

April 28 Constructing a Big Picture: Final Synthesis Workshop

April 30 Summations and Course Evaluations.

Final Essay due. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu by 3:30