



American Cultural History: Selected Topics Material Culture and Consumer Culture

COURSE GUIDE

History 546

Spring 2010

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.

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.
- 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.

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

- Crowley, John E. "The Sensibility of Comfort" *American Historical Review* Vol. 104, No. 3 (1999): 749-782.
- Garvey, Ellen Gruber. "Readers Read Advertising into Their Lives: The Trade Card Scrapbook," pp. 16-50; 190-197. In *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. [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]
- Hale, Margaret E. "The Nineteenth-Century American Trade Card." *Business History Review* Vol. 74, No. 4 (2000): 683-688.
- Izard, Holly V. "Random or Systematic? An Evaluation of the Probate Process." *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 32, No. 2/3 (1997): 147-167.
- 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.
- Snow, Rachel. "Tourism and American Identity: Kodak's Conspicuous Consumers Abroad" *The Journal of American Culture* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2008): 7-19.
- 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 the assignments section of 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

Undergraduates

Primary Source Analyses 90%
 Participation 10%

Graduate Students

Primary Source Analyses 60%
 Participation 10%
 Review Essay 30%

Participation: (10%).

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.
4. Discussion Questions—All students are required to submit at least two discussion questions to the Bb Discussion Board by noon on the day before each class. Questions should focus on relationships among the authors arguments in readings assigned for that class period and/or connections to previous readings. Strive to identify the big questions in consumer history. What questions might the assigned scholars ask each other each week?

Primary Source Analysis (Undergraduates 90%; Graduates 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.

Undergraduates: Essays should be 6-7 pages, typed and double-spaced. Use Turabian style citations [<http://library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/handouts/turabian.asp>] for all references.

Episode 1: Probate Inventory (30%), due Feb. 15 by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

Episode 2: Trade Cards (30%), due March 22 by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

Episode 3: Consumer Magazine (30%), due April 19 by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

Graduate Students: Essays should be 7-10 pages, typed and double-spaced. Use Turabian style citations [<http://library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/handouts/turabian.asp>] for all references.

Episode 1: Probate Inventory (20%), due Feb. 15 by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

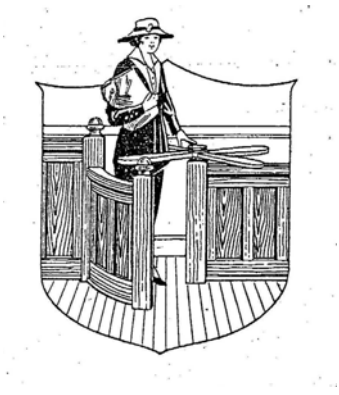
Episode 2: Trade Cards (20%), due March 22 by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

Episode 3: Consumer Magazine (20%), due April 19 by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

Graduate Students: Review Essay (30%)

Using the book review guidelines for the American Studies journal, *American Quarterly* (http://www.americanquarterly.org/index.php/about/book_reviews) 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 March 5 by noon. Email your proposal to lctolber@uncg.edu. You may want to consider developing a review essay that can connect the content of this course to your thesis or other graduate work in your major. The final essay is due April 28 by 5:00 p.m. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu.



Course Schedule

January 20 **Introductions**

Episode 1: Probate Inventories and Consumer Revolutions in Early America

January 27 **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)

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

Izard, Holly. "Random or Systematic?: An Evaluation of the Probate Process. *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 32, Nos. 2-3 (1997): 147-167.

February 3 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)

Crowley, John E. "The Sensibility of Comfort" *American Historical Review* Vol. 104, No. 3 (1999): 749-782.

February 10 Consumption and Cultural Change

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.

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.

February 15 Probate Inventory Analysis due by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

Episode 2: Trade Cards and Nineteenth-Century Consumer History

February 17 Introduction to Trade Cards

Read:

Garvey, Ellen Gruber. "Readers Read Advertising into Their Lives: The Trade Card Scrapbook," pp. 16-50; 190-197. In *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996 [ereserves]

Hale, Margaret E. "The Nineteenth-Century American Trade Card." *Business History Review* Vol. 74, No. 4 (2000): 683-688.

February 24 Consumerism as Imperialism

Read:

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

March 3 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 Graduate Students: Review Essay Proposal due by noon.
Email your proposal to lctolber@uncg.edu**

March 10 ***Spring Break*******

March 17 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 22 Trade Card Analysis due by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

<p style="text-align: center;">Episode 3: Popular Magazines and the Challenges of Studying Mass Consumer Society in the Twentieth Century</p>
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**March 24 Part 1: Workers and Audiences:
Was there a Mass Culture Consumer Culture in the 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)
"Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" (Greenberg)

Part 2: Popular Magazine Workshop

Snow, Rachel. "Tourism and American Identity: Kodak's Conspicuous Consumers Abroad" *The Journal of American Culture* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2008): 7-19.

March 31 Challenges of Studying Consumers in Mass Industrial Contexts

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.

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

April 7 Mass Consumer Society in the Postwar Era

Read:

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

April 14 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)

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

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 19 Popular Magazine Analysis due by 5:00 p.m. Post to Bb Digital Dropbox.

**April 21 New Paradigms: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective
Special Graduate Student Session. Attendance optional for undergraduates.**

Read:

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

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

**April 28 Summations and Course Evaluations.
Final Graduate Student Essay due. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu by 5:00.**