American Cultural History: Selected Topics
Material Culture and Consumer Culture

COURSE GUIDE

History 546          Spring 2010
Prof. L. Tolbert
Office: MHRA 2109          Hours: by appointment
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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)


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.)


- 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Source Analyses</th>
<th>90%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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**Graduate Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Source Analyses</th>
<th>60%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review Essay</td>
<td>30%</td>
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**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

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**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

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)

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)

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

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Episode 2: Trade Cards and Nineteenth-Century Consumer History

February 17  Introduction to Trade Cards
Read:

February 24  Consumerism as Imperialism
Read:

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)
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:

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

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Episode 3: Popular Magazines and the Challenges of Studying Mass Consumer Society in the Twentieth Century

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

March 31    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
April 7 Mass Consumer Society in the Postwar Era
Read:

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)

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.