

American Consumer Culture

CC Alumni Reading Group Syllabus Spring 2011

General Description

One of the defining features of American culture is rampant consumerism. We are all participants in a consumer culture that shapes our desires, our work, our spending, our relationships, even our spiritual lives. How did America come to be this way, and how should we think about it? Although a relatively new field, the literature on consumerism is growing ever more voluminous. Authors bring a variety of different perspectives to the topic, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, and history.

For the alumni reading groups I've chosen four fairly recent topics: the intersection of business and religion in the early 20th century, suburban consumption in the postwar era, globalization of commerce, and the recent emphasis on aesthetic value in our consumer culture. For a very quick summary of consumerism's historical development, I've also included a few pages from Lawrence B. Glickman's introduction to *Consumer Society in American History* (Cornell, 1999), one of many good course readers on this topic. His bullet points summarize the work of a generation of scholars. Certain persistent questions include:

When did consumerism take root in America?

How has the practice of consumerism either bound Americans together or caused divisions among them?

How has the desire for goods influenced American politics?

Have moral/religious critiques tempered the effects of consumerism?

How has consumerism been integral to the "making of Americans?"

Are consumption practices related to class, racial, ethnic, or other social identities?

I've provided brief summaries of the readings and some questions for discussion. I also expect you'll bring your own questions and concerns to this timely topic!

Unit I: Religion and Consumerism at the Turn of the 20th Century

Read:

T. J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930,” originally published in Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, eds., *The Culture of Consumption* (Pantheon, 1983), available online at <http://www.valpo.edu/christcollege/alumni/readinggroups.php>. This is not a quick read, but it is a highly influential article with an important thesis. I’ve always been interested in Lears’ work because he puts religious life at the center of cultural transformation. The last part of Lears’ article is his assessment of Barton’s book, and will serve to introduce that text to you.

Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925). Available as revised edition or eBook. This little book was a phenomenal best seller in the early twentieth century, written by a fascinating character. As an artifact of popular culture, this text reveals both the religious tenor and business environment of the day.

Discussion Questions:

1. The historian Jackson Lears argues that in the early 20th century a former ethic of “perpetual work, compulsive saving, civic responsibility, and a rigid morality of self-denial” was replaced by “a new set of values sanctioning periodic leisure, compulsive spending, apolitical passivity, and an apparently permissive (but subtly coercive morality of individual fulfillment.” He shows how advertising was just one of many institutions and practices responsible for the shift from “self-denial” to “self-realization.” This suggests that the emphasis in American culture was increasingly on individual emotional and social needs, perhaps leading to our current cultural emphasis on “self-actualization.” Does Lears’ argument ring true? Can “anxious self-absorption,” manipulated to great advantage by advertisers and assuaged by a “pseudo-religion of health,” provide a kind of alternative religious life?
2. Vigorous wellness may be a goal that continues to shape our culture and our advertising. How then, does one explain the prevalence of television ads showing guys on couches, watching TV, eating Doritos, and drinking beer? Is there an alternative, competing paradigm of “wellness”?
3. Bruce Barton found a way to resolve the tension between Christianity and business: rediscover Jesus as the most brilliant businessman who ever lived. What might seem at first to be an absurd idea perhaps becomes less so as you read Barton’s best-selling book. Is it completely wrongheaded to think of a Jesus as a businessman, selling a new religious movement, and then to take Jesus’ lead on business practices as well as matters of faith?

4. Barton argued that an effeminate, weak, overly serious image of Jesus is not just inaccurate, but drives people, vigorous young men in particular, away from the church. (This concern is very common at the time, and led to the historical emphasis on “muscular Christianity” and the rise of institutions like the YMCA.) How does he address this concern in his book?
5. Barton’s Jesus is a confident, charismatic, active, and service-minded leader. This is the kind of business executive Barton similarly admired. What *work* is done by such a leader? When Barton mentions “big reward” that will come to his type of leader, what does he mean (83)? For Barton, what is the End of business?
6. “The parable of the Good Samaritan,” Barton argues, “is the greatest advertisement of all time.” (67) Is there truth in this statement? What makes the story, and the manner in which it is told, so compelling?
7. Where do you see religious or spiritual belief shaping or being shaped by today’s advertisers? What, for instance, do Super Bowl commercials suggest about the deepest values our society holds? How is an “atmosphere of religiosity” be used by today’s advertisers to promote consumption? Do you believe it is possible that there *can* be a positive connection between religion, business, and consumption?

Unit II: Postwar Suburbia

Watch: “In the Suburbs,” promotional video for *Redbook* magazine, 1957. Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/IntheSub1957>

Watch: *Mad Men* season 1, episode 3, *Marriage of Figaro*. *Mad Men* chronicles the fast-paced lives of the employees of a Madison Avenue advertising firm and their families. Don Draper, the main character, is a charismatic and successful adman, with a mysterious past and an endless string of extramarital liaisons. The series begins just before the Kennedy-Nixon election.

Read: “Destination Suburbia,” chapter 7 in Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society, 1865-2005, From Hearth to HDT* (2009), 198-214. (This is a chapter from a broad survey of American consumerism; read if you’d like more background to better understand the film.)

***Assignment: Bring a family picture showing domestic life in the postwar years to share and critique from a consumerism point of view.**

Discussion Questions:

1. *Redbook* magazine circulated the film *In the Suburbs* in the late 1950s in order to attract advertising dollars, so of course the filmmakers had an incentive to depict new suburbanites as eager consumers. Nevertheless, the film offers a reasonable picture of the young adults establishing homes and families in the postwar years. While not representative of all Americans by any means, it gives a fair account of a social group whose needs and tastes largely settled the consumer patterns of Americans for years to come. Their Boomer children (despite some rebellious years) have largely adopted and accelerated their parents’ consumption habits. Does this film ring true to your own family’s experiences in the postwar years? What were the consumer consequences of an emphasis on the nuclear family and the single-family home? How were consumer desires intertwined with other concerns, such as education, politics, or social life? What does the film tell us is *new* about this generation of consumers?
2. Nostalgia for the postwar life displayed in “In the Suburbs” is one reason for the phenomenal success of HBO’s *Mad Men*. The producers of this show go to great lengths to ensure historical accuracy, but of course the drama comes from revisiting the dark side of those postwar years. How does *Mad Men*’s emphasis on advertising and New York promote a particular, negative understanding of postwar culture?
3. In this episode, Don Draper exhibits increasing dissatisfaction with his life. His picture-perfect family and suburban life in Ossining, New York are apparently a source of angst rather than satisfaction. Describe the people who show up for Sally’s birthday party. What seems to motivate them? What spin does the show put on suburban material life and consumer goods? What is the significance of the playhouse, and Don’s interaction with it?

4. What are the rules that appear to govern suburban consumption, in both *In the Suburbs* and *Marriage of Figaro* (think about the VW bug, the Christmas wrapping paper, etc. in *Mad Men* and the goods associated with raising children in *In the Suburbs*). How do entertaining and consumption work together?
5. Why does Don disappear, and why does he reappear, with a dog? And what is the significance of the 8 mm camera? (The theme of making memories reappears in episode 13, about the marketing of the Kodak slide carousel. Another great episode for discussion!)

Unit III: Globalization

Read:

Pietra Rivoli, *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade* (Wiley, 2009 edition).

Many of the questions about our current consumer culture have to do with globalization. *Travels of a T-Shirt* provides a terrific introduction to the complexities of globalization, its economics, politics, and social dynamics. Rivoli traces one garment from the cotton fields of west Texas, to factories in China, to an American market, and finally to a resale market in Tanzania, where, she argues, the T-shirt encounters a truly free market for the first time.

***Assignment: Go through your clothes closet, read labels, and make a note of the products' origins.**

Discussion Questions:

1. Many times during the unfolding of this story Rivoli provides the long historical view. Does knowing about the past history of topics such as global markets, activism, and labor practices change the way you understand current practices and possible futures?
2. What does Rivoli mean by the “virtuous circle” or “vicious circle” surrounding various producers or commodities? Give an example of each.
3. What is the “race to the bottom” (ch. 6)? Does it have both negative and positive results?
4. Rivoli describes the dynamic and inescapable relationship between economics and politics. Politics promotes not just special interests but safe and fair labor practices, and social and economic stability. Free market economics promises to provide the most wealth quickly and efficiently, with great benefit for many people but significant instability and inequality. What would be an ideal relationship between these two forces? In this book, where do we get closest to that happy balance?
5. In what ways is China—as producer and consumer—an important yet problematic player in the free market economy of T-shirts (and other commodities)?
6. At the end of the book, what do you know about Rivoli’s own position on global trade? What does she mean when she claims that she has discovered “a moral case for trade even more compelling than the economic case” (p. 256)?
7. How might you, as a voter and consumer, respond to the challenges posed by this book?
8. What are the advantages to a single commodity study such as this? Does “circling the stone garden” work as a means of understanding a complex problem?
9. What did you learn from this book that surprised you the most?

Unit IV: Aesthetics

Read:

Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture and Consciousness* (HarperCollins, 2003)

Virginia Postrel writes provocatively about economics and culture. In this book she takes on the naysayers who lambast consumerism, claiming that what she deems the “Age of Aesthetics” is rapidly changing for the better how we live and work. For Postrel, the increasing availability of well-designed products is something that is deeply satisfying and “a vital component of a healthy, forward-looking society.” Aesthetic pleasure and meaning are fundamental human wants, not simply the frosting on other needs. She claims that good design adds both value to products and value to our lives, allowing us to express and develop our identity in creative and abundant ways.

***Assignment: bring a well-designed consumer product to the discussion and explain why it appeals to you.**

Discussion Questions:

1. Does Postrel’s description of the “look of age and feel” ring true?
2. There is something to be said for aesthetics, but what about all this attention to personal appearance—might this just be narcissism? And might there be something better we can manufacture out of our boredom than increased consumption?
3. In the chapter titled “Surface and Substance,” Postrel argues that the two are not opposing forces, and that the “aesthetic imperative” is not a substitute for truth or reality. Are you convinced? Does style add something important to our lives (p. 71)? Is the example of Hillary Clinton’s hair instructive (72-3)?
5. What do you think of Postrel’s idea of “aesthetic identity” (*I like that. I’m like that.*)?
6. It can be hard to legitimize the value of aesthetics. A common critique of “look and feel” is that it is all fleeting show, and therefore inauthentic. Postrel counters this by arguing that many traditional notions of aesthetic authenticity are impersonal and limit our ability to shape our world for our own purposes. Consumer goods and services allow us the opportunity to “match outward and inward identity.” Aesthetic consumption “affirms our ideals, expresses our connections with others, gives us the pleasures of problem solving and discovery, or simply allows us to enjoy surfaces for their own sake” (121). Are you convinced?
7. What does Postrel mean by things that are “smart *and* pretty” (ch. 6)?

8. This book was published before the recent economic downturn. Do you find that this cultural emphasis on “look and feel” has held steady?

9. Where do you think this is all headed? Does a vital economy require a choice of 1500 drawer pulls? Once every coffee shop looks like Starbucks, will “look and feel” take a different turn? What do you see happening in the world of consumer aesthetics? Have aesthetics become *too* important?