

Cultures of Consumption

Mondays, 3:55 – 6:55PM, Ruth Adams Building 018

050:333:01 (American Studies)

512:333:01 (History)



Hugo Gellert, "The Transformation of Money into Capital," 1934

Prof. Andy Urban

aturban@rci.rutgers.edu

Office Hours:

11AM to 2PM Tuesdays, or by appointment

Ruth Adams Building 205E

Course Description

This course surveys the cultural and social impact of markets, and changes to how we consume goods and services, from 1492 to the present. We'll examine, among other topics, the historic tensions and conflicts between societies defined by the production of goods and services and those organized around consumption; the relationship between consumer practices and the condition of laborers; the impact that consumption has on the environment and different ecologies; how consumerism has empowered, exploited, and governed ideas about race, gender, and sexuality; how consumption has changed with the development of the advertising industry; and, the politics and economics of debt. This class will combine analysis with fieldwork, oral history, and digital humanities projects. Activities will also include a class field trip to NYC to examine stores as living habitats for consumerism and to visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's exhibition on the garment industry.

This course qualifies for the Critical Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies (CCRES) minor. If you are interested in learning more about CCRES, please let me know.

American Studies Department Learning Goals Met by this Course:

Students will learn to synthesize interdisciplinary sources and methods in order to analyze consumption as a form of politics, ideology, and citizenship. Students will learn to use scholarship in history, politics, literature, and art in order to understand the significance of consumption to American culture and history. Students will be able to write well; speak articulately; and think critically, analytically, and creatively.

History Department Learning Goals Met by this Course:

Students who study history at Rutgers can expect to develop and understanding of the following concepts:

- 1.) How individuals are shaped by their own past and by the past of their society and institutions;
- 2.) The role of human agency in bringing about change in society and institutions;
- 3.) The operation of large-scale forces responsible for causing change over time;
- 4.) The role of diversity and difference in shaping human experience;
- 5.) The nature of cause-and-effect relationships in human affairs as they have played out over time and as they continue to operate in the present.

Students who study history at Rutgers can also expect to develop the following practical skills:

- 1.) The ability to read and understand a variety of literary forms, including primary sources, as well as secondary sources written in academic prose;
- 2.) The ability to analyze information effectively and to construct cause-and-effect relationships from disparate data sources;
- 3.) The ability to write persuasively and communicate effectively;
- 4.) The ability to work independently and to conduct independent research.

Learning Goals Specific to this Course:

- a) To explore how the production and consumption of relates to the construction of racial, ethnic, gendered, and sexual identities.
- b) To think critically about the everyday exchanges that take place in a capitalist economy and what it means – both in the past and present – to be market actors.

Required Readings

- Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (Random House, 2001 [1917]), ISBN#: 9780375757983
- Louis Hyman, *Borrow: The American Way of Debt* (Knopf, 2012), ISBN#: 9780307741684
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), ISBN#: 9780691162751.

In addition to the books listed above, which you must purchase and bring to class with you, there will also be chapters, articles, and other readings that I will make available to you in the form of a course reader.

Readings correspond to the day they will be discussed and need to be completed before class. You are required to bring readings to class with you, since we will refer to the text directly.

Assignment and Grading Overview

Additional information on the assignments will be provided in separate handouts.

In-Class participation - 15%

Weekly Discussion Questions - 10%

In order to ensure that you are doing the readings and engaging them critically, each week you will be responsible for posting on our SAKAI site – in the Forum section – questions, issues, and problems relating to that week’s readings. In general, when analyzing secondary sources you want to be attentive to the authors’ arguments, the significance and importance of the claims that they are making about their specific topic, and how the text relates to how we understand consumerism more broadly.

All questions must be posted to SAKAI by no later than 5PM on Sunday, the day before we meet.

Discussion Leadership - 10%

During the course of the semester, each student will also lead discussion for one seminar (assisted by me). Discussion leaders are responsible for:

- Selecting from their classmates’ SAKAI posts the questions and thoughts that they want to include as part of discussion. Although the discussion leader does not need to post to SAKAI the week they are leading, they should add their own questions and framing points to the handout that they are preparing.
- Discussion leaders are also responsible for determining at least three goals for that day’s class, in terms of what we want to figure out or explore. (See the “Learning Goals” listed in the syllabus above for examples.)
- Discussion leaders should be prepared to introduce at least one item of related material – a video, news article, song, etc. – that offers connections to that class’s readings and theme.

POINTS AWARDED FOR CREATIVITY! Although not required, you are welcome to also incorporate activities, group work, or other methods for engaging the material as you see fit. And feel free to set up a time to meet or Skype with me to review what you are working on in advance of class. I am happy to offer feedback.

Discussion leaders must email work plans and other materials to me by no later than 2PM on the day of class (Monday). I will print and prepare other materials for class.

Levinsky Essay - 20%

* Due Friday, Oct. 14, submitted via SAKAI by 11:59PM

Blog Post 1, Advertisement Deconstructed - 15%

* Due, posted to class website by Friday, November 11, no later than 11:59PM

Blog Post 2, Talking about Debt - 15%

* Due, posted to class website by Friday, December 2, no later than 11:59 PM

Blog Post 3, The Life of a Commodity - 15%

* Due, posted to class website by Monday, Dec. 19, by no later than 11:59PM

Grading Scale:

92-100=**A**; 87-91=**B+**; 81-86=**B**; 77-80=**C+**; 70-76=**C**; 60-69=**D**; 0-59=**F**

Note: there are no minus grades at Rutgers.

Class Policies

Please make sure that you are receiving and checking SAKAI announcements via email.

I regularly use the site to update class information, assignments, etc. **You are responsible for keeping up-to-date with class information and making sure that you are connected.**

Attendance in the seminar is mandatory.

This is a seminar, and the expectation is that you will both attend all the classes, and regularly participate.

If you have to miss class due to sickness, an emergency, or another excused reason, please use the University absence reporting website <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/> to indicate the date and reason for your absence. An email is automatically sent to me.

Unexcused late assignments will receive a deduction.

This is a no computer class. I believe that our ability to have a discussion, unimpeded by distractions, is best served by only having a hard copy of the text, a pen or pencil, and something in which you can take hand-written notes. I realize that some of you might see this as an imposition. I would encourage you to instead approach this as an experiment.

To assist, I will be covering the costs of course packets.

Please do not use smartphones. If I see you using a smartphone I will not interrupt the class to lecture you, but I will mark you for a deduction in your participation grade.

Special Accommodation Requests:

All special accommodation requests must be brought to my attention during the first two weeks of class. Full disability policies and procedures are available for review at: <http://disabilityservices.rutgers.edu/>.

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations must follow the procedures outlined at <http://disabilityservices.rutgers.edu/request.html>

Academic Integrity Policy:

<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/integrity.shtml>

Violations include: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, denying others access to information or material, and facilitating violations of academic integrity.

Honor Pledge:

I pledge on my honor that I will adhere to all aspects of the Rutgers Academic Integrity Policy

By accepting this syllabus and enrolling in this course, you assume responsibility for knowing the above policies and the possible penalties – including suspension and expulsion – should you violate the Honor Pledge.

X -----
(signature)

Take an interactive tutorial on Plagiarism and Academic Integrity:

<http://sccweb.scc-net.rutgers.edu/douglass/sal/plagiarism/Intro.html>

Class Schedule and Assigned Readings

(All meetings are on Mondays, except for class field trip)

September 12

- Thorstein Veblen, "Conspicuous Consumption," in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)
- Jean Baudrillard, excerpts from *Consumer Society* (1970)
- Pierre Bourdieu, "Introduction," in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984)

September 19

- Adam Smith, "Of the Origin and Use of Money" and "Of the Component Parts of the Price of Commodities," from *Wealth of Nations* (1776)
- Katrine Marçal, "In which it becomes apparent that economic man is not a woman," in *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner* (2016), 29-41.
- Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," from *Capital, Volume 1* (1867)
- Augustine Sedgewick, "Against Flows," (2014)

September 26

- Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Books I - VII

October 3

- Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Books VIII - XI
- Eileen Boris, "Consumers of the World Unite! Campaigns Against Sweating, Past and Present," in *Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective* (2003), 203-24

[NO CLASS ON OCTOBER 10]

October 15 (SATURDAY)

* Field trip to American Girl Store; Lower East Side Tenement Museum

October 17

- Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Books XII – end
- James Surowiecki, “The Mobility Myth,” *The New Yorker*, March 3, 2014

October 24

- Eric Lott, “Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture,” *Love and Theft* (1993)
- Micki McElya, “The Life of ‘Aunt Jemima,’” *Clinging to Mammy* (2007)
- Jeffrey Pilcher, “The Messy Business of Tacos,” *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food* (2012)

October 31

In-class screening, *They Live!*, dir. John Carpenter (1988)

- Tony Lack, “The (Il)logic of Punk Practices,” (1995)
- Tom Frank, “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent?” (1997)

November 7

- Hyman, *Borrow: The American Way of Debt*, Introduction through chapter 2
- Interview with Salvatore Restivo, Rutgers Oral History Archive

November 14

- Hyman, *Borrow: The American Way of Debt*, chapters 3, 6, 8, & conclusion
- Annie Waldman, “New Jersey’s Student Loan Program is ‘State-Sanctioned Loan-Sharking,’” *ProPublica*, July 3, 2016

November 21

In-class screening, *Life and Debt*, dir. Stephanie Black (2001)

- Lance Selfa, “The Same Bosses” *Jacobin*, March 22, 2016

November 28

- Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Part I

December 5

- Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Part II
- Marc Levinson, "The Battle for New York's Port," in *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 76-100.

December 12

- Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Part IV to end