

DRAFT Seminar: Consumer Culture

History 407/507
Mondays 15:00-17:50
Hall
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As students of history, you have most of the time been consumers of historical scholarship. This is a worthy form of consumption. To be a discerning consumer capable of analyzing what you read and synthesizing different ideas is a high accomplishment. In this seminar, however, your main role is as producer of historical research. Your major assignment is to research and write a 15-20 page paper (roughly 4000-6000 words) on a topic related to consumer culture. Your paper must be based on primary sources. What is a primary source? Here's a [brief explanation](#) and a [website](#) (with links to a brief video) that lists a few of the more prominent online collections of primary sources. Note that not all the collections mentioned are accessible to people at the U of O, but many are. (What is "consumer culture"? We've got all term to figure that out, but we'll start in the first class session.)

The seminar will have three phases. In the first phase, we will meet as a group for discussion of common readings and approaches to the topic of "consumer culture" and for discussion of issues and methods in historical research. During these weeks, you and I must confer and agree on your paper topic. There will be brief assignments during these weeks aimed at formulating a suitable paper topic. In each of these weeks, we'll read some historical studies and some contemporary commentaries on consumer society. In phase two, we'll skip two weeks' class sessions but you'll be actively researching and writing your seminar paper and meeting with me for advice and feedback. In the third phase, we'll reconvene for student presentations on their research. After this, you'll complete and submit your final paper.

I've ordered three books at the University of Oregon Bookstore: Lawrence Glickman, ed., *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*; Juliet B. Schor and Douglas Holt, eds., *The Consumer Society Reader*; and Matthew Hilton, *Prosperity for All: Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization*. They should also be available for purchase on-line and elsewhere.

Class Sessions

Jan. 3 (Week 1): Introduction

We'll talk about the nature of a historical research seminar, what's expected of you, and what value (beyond fulfilling a requirement) the seminar might have. I hope to focus on some or all of the following:

1. How to ask historical questions and how to choose a paper topic.
2. Primary and secondary sources—what they are and how to find them

(and a word about Wikipedia)

3. When to read history books and articles slowly and carefully—and when to read them very quickly

4. Libraries and archives—real and cyber

I also want to explore with you what your own conception of “consumer culture” might be and what has brought you to this course.

Readings: Please try to read the following brief items before class.

1. Glickman, “Introduction” and Raymond Williams, “Consumer” in Lawrence Glickman, ed., *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*

2. Holt and Schor, “Introduction: Do Americans Consume too Much?” in Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt, *The Consumer Society Reader*.

3. David Steigerwald, “All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought,” *Journal of American History*, volume 93, number 2 (September 2006): 385-413. Optional but recommended: replies by T.H. Breen and Elizabeth Cohen, which follow Steigerwald’s article.

NOTE: Knight Library has a hard copy of this journal, but I’d recommend that you find it online. This will begin to familiarize you with search methods for scholarly articles. Hint: Perhaps the easiest way to get at it is to go to the huge index of American history writings, *America: History and Life*, which is online. Then search for the article. When you get a citation to the article, look for a link that says “PDF full text” or “HTML full text”. If you don’t see one, try the button “Find Text”. That will take you to a screen that tells you whether full text is available through UO libraries and, if so, where to go to get it. Note also, if you’re off campus, you may have to set up a VPN in order to access it this way. It’s a pretty simple process.

3. An article I wrote for a website on using advertisements on the web as historical sources, on line [here](#).

4. Some advice I’ve prepared on how to choose a research paper topic, on line [here](#).

Jan. 10 (Week 2): Consumption before the Industrial Revolution

Among the most interesting developments in the study of consumer culture are studies that find consumerism to have taken hold in various places (in particular Western Europe and North America) before mass production. Was there a “consumer revolution” in the early modern Western world?

Readings: 1. Part Two: “Roots of American Consumer Society” (pp.85-146) in Glickman.

2. Chapters 1,2,3 and 11 in Holt and Schor.

Jan. 17 is the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday: No class that day, but we should meet this week.

Assignment: When we meet this week, bring a one-paragraph statement of your topic. Your statement should contain the historical question or questions you plan to answer in your research paper. Along with the paragraph, bring a short list of the major primary sources you intend to use in your research. Attach a photocopy of a page from

one of the primary sources on your list or print out a page with a description or table of contents from a website containing the primary sources.

Jan 24 (Week 4): Consumerism, Capitalism and Mass Production

Is a consumer society the inevitable consequence of a mass production economy? If a consumer society means that people's primary identities come from their consumption activities, how does consumerism relate to other identities we bear, notably those based on race, class and gender? What is the relationship between consumption and democracy? Could people retain (or create) a sense of their own power and agency through their choices as consumers? These are some of the questions that emerge in this week's readings.

Readings: 1. Chapters 9, 11 and at least one of the following: 10, 12 or 13, in Glickman.
2. Chapters 12,13,16,18 and 19 in Holt and Schor. I suggest reading chapter 19 (Marx) before the others.

Jan. 31 (Week 5): Consumerism in Contemporary History

The vast changes not only in the United States but throughout the world in the last half-century or so have greatly affected the structures, processes and meanings of consumption. This week, we'll look at aspects of consumption in post-World War II America and in the non-Western world. Is there a world-wide consumer culture? Is it the product of Western imperial domination of the rest of the world? How, and to what extent, have regional and national cultural patterns created a variety of different consumer cultures?

Readings: 1. Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 18 in Glickman.
2. Chapters 23-28 in Holt and Schor.

Feb. 7 (Week 6): Research and Writing/A Different View of Consumerism

We'll devote this week to two different topics: First, Research and Writing: How can I find out information about my topic? How can I organize everything I have (notes, photocopies, thoughts in my head, documents on the computer, etc.) into a coherent and convincing paper? Second, Matthew Hilton, *Prosperity for All: Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization* is a recent book with a sharply different view of consumption and consumerism than most of our other readings. This will give you some sense of the most recent scholarship on topics relevant to this seminar.

Reading: Hilton, *Prosperity for All*, Introduction and chapters 1,3,4,6,7 and Conclusion. Chapters 2,5 and 8 are optional.

Feb. 14 and Feb. 21 (Week 7 and Week 8): No Classes—Research and Writing

Assignment: By Feb. 14, you should have refined your paper topic, conducted a good deal of your research, and organized your thoughts about the seminar paper. Submit (by email attachment or by hard copy to my office) a **one-paragraph** statement of your topic **and** an **outline** of your paper. The one-paragraph topic statement may be identical to the