European Consumer Society, 1700-present

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Email
Course Meeting
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Consumption (the process of producing, selling, and using commercial goods) has become so commonplace in late-modern Western cultures, that few of us question how or why we consume. Yet, consumption is not a natural phenomenon but a culturally constructed practice that has a rich and complicated history. This course explores the evolution of modern Europe’s consumer society from the eighteenth century to the present to understand how changing patterns of consumption fostered new relationships between individuals and the material world. We will pay particular attention to how consumer society intersected with other important historical developments.

European consumer society evolved through three stages: the “birth of consumption;” the “bourgeois consumer society;” and the “mass consumer society.” In the first part of the course, we examine the birth of consumption, a process that began with the dual industrial and political revolutions of the late-eighteenth-century. We start by defining major terms and by situating consumption in historical context. We then explore how the early modern marketplace, the luxury trades, and the industrial revolution set the stage for a fully-realized consumer society. In the second part of the course, we focus on the development of a “bourgeois” consumer society in the period between 1850 and 1920. We will investigate how the growth of cities, the ability to produce more products more quickly, and the advent of new retail outlets contributed to this society. We will also explore the different forms of consumption practiced by the middle classes and the cultural meanings attached to consumption. In the final part of the course, we will examine the mass consumer society that emerged in Europe in the 1920s. The primary focus of this unit will be on the political significance of consumption in the twentieth century. To this end, we will study the transformation of European markets during the Cold War, the democratization of the consumer market, and the influence of America on European culture, society, and everyday life.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To demonstrate the historical significance of consumer society by examining its connections to major themes in the history of Modern Europe
- To introduce students to the methods of social and cultural history
- To broaden student understanding of consumption by exploring different ways to consume and the meanings attached to them
- To provide students with a richer understanding of the everyday lives and practices of ordinary people
- To improve each student’s ability to think critically and to apply critical thinking skills to historical texts
REQUIRED TEXTS

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854)


Emile Zola, *The Ladies Paradise* (1883)

Course Reader Available at the Humanities Copy Center (1st floor)

*Note: The Making of the West, a general textbook on European History from 1750-present, is on reserve at College Library. It may be useful if you have not taken History 120 prior to this course.*

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

1-pg Ad Assessment due December 1st (10%)

4-5 pg. Essay due October 1st (20%)

4-5 pg. Essay due November 12th (20%)

Midterm Exam Friday, October 17th (20%)

Final Exam Sunday, December 14th (25%)

Active participation/attendance/discussion questions (5%)

COURSE POLICIES

PLAGIARISM & ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT

COURSE SCHEDULE
### UNIT 1: The Birth of Consumer Society, 1700-1850

#### September 1-5: Conceptions of the World of Goods
- **Lecture 1:** Labor Day (no class)
- **Lecture 2:** Course Introduction
- **Lecture 3:** Consumption in Historical Perspective and the Contested Meanings of Things
- **Readings:**
  - Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,”
  - Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, “Culture,” “Consumer,”

#### September 8-12: The Early European Marketplace
- **Lecture 1:** From Subsistence to Comfort: The Family Economy in the 18th Century
- **Lecture 2:** The World of Luxury
- **Discussion:** Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*
- **Readings:**
  - Jones, “Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Regime Paris”
  - Smith, *Wealth of Nations* Sourcebook excerpts

#### September 15-19: European Industrialization
- **Lecture 1:** New Technologies and the Re-organization of Work
- **Lecture 2:** Consumer Society in 18th-century England
- **Discussion:** *Hard Times* (1st half) and Thompson
- **Readings:**
  - Dickens, *Hard Times* (1st half)

#### September 22-26: The Fruits of Mechanized Labor
- **Lecture 1:** The Underside of Consumption: the Conditions of Labor
- **Lecture 2:** Class Distinction: New Commodities and New Consumers
- **Discussion:** *Hard Times* and Marx
- **Readings:**
  - Dickens, *Hard Times* (finish)
  - Marx, article on Commodity Fetishism
Sept. 29-Oct. 3: Building the Commercial Metropolis
   Lecture 1: European Urbanization
   Lecture 2: New Merchant Environments
   Discussion: Miller and Jordan
           Jordan, “Haussmann and “Haussmannisation”: The Legacy of Paris”
   Essay due Wednesday, October 1st

October 6-10: Revolutions in Retailing
   Lecture 1: The Birth of the Department Store & the Invention of Shopping
   Lecture 2: Advertising
   Discussion: *The Ladies’ Paradise* (1st ½) and Rappaport
   Readings: Zola, *The Ladies’ Paradise* (begin)
           Rappaport, “‘The Halls of Temptation’: Gender, Politics, and the Construction of the Department Store in Late Victorian England.”

UNIT 2: A Bourgeois Consumer Society, 1850-1920

October 13-17: Popular Forms of Middle-Class Consumption
   Lecture 1: Collecting, Leisure, and Travel
   Discussion: *The Ladies’ Paradise* (2nd ½)
   Midterm Exam Friday October 17th
   Readings: Zola, *The Ladies’ Paradise* (finish)

October 20-24: Gender and Consumption
   Lecture 1: Conspicuous Consumption: representing the middle-class family
   Lecture 2: The New Woman
   Lecture 3: Consumption and Sexuality: the Kleptomaniac and the Prostitute
   Readings: Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption”
           Roberts, “Gender, Consumption and Commodity Culture”
October 27-31: Imperialism, Nationalism, and Consumption
Discussion: Veblen and Roberts
Lecture 1: Nations, Nationalism, and Consumption
Lecture 2: Selling Europe Abroad: Empire and Orientalism
Readings: Richards, chapter 3 and 5
Breckman, “Disciplining Consumption: the Debate about Luxury in Wilhemine Germany, 1890-1914”®

November 3-7: New Commodities and New Ways to Consume
Lecture 1: Consuming at the World’s Fair
Lecture 2: Case Studies: Fashion, Transportation, and Entertainment in the Early 20th C
Discussion: Moser and Schwartz
Readings: Kurt Moser, “WWI and the Creation of the Desire for Automobiles” pp. 195-222®
Richards, chapter 2
Schwartz, “Museums and Mass Spectacle: The Musée Grévin as a Monument to Modern Life” pp. 7-26®

UNIT 3: Mass Consumer Society, 1920-2008

November 10-14: The Politics of Mass Consumption
Lecture 1: Origins of Mass Consumption
Lecture 2: Consumer Citizenship
Discussion: de Grazia and ad assessment assignment
Readings: de Grazia, “Nationalizing Women: Competition between Fascist and Commercial Cultural Models in Mussolini’s Italy”®

Essay due Wednesday, November 12th

November 17-21: Domesticity and the Interwar Consumer Household
Lecture 1: European Economic Crisis
Lecture 2: Consumption and Daily Life
Discussion: Consumption in Interwar Europe
Readings: Bowden, “The Technological Revolution that Never Was: Gender, Class, and the Diffusion of Household Appliances in Interwar England”®
Koshar, “Germans at the Wheel: Cars and Interwar Leisure Travel in Germany”®

November 24-28: Between Austerity and Communism: Consumption in Postwar Europe
Lecture 1: The New Europe: Rift and Recovery in the Postwar Decade
Lecture 2: Library and Consultation Day
Lecture 3: Thanksgiving Break (no class)
Readings: Drakulic, How we Survived Communism and Even Laughed

December 1-5: Consumption and the Culture Wars
Lecture 1: Thirty Glorious Years (1945-1970s)
Lecture 2: Americanization in Western Europe
Lecture 3: The Communist Challenge: Consumption in Eastern Europe
Readings: Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered”®
Horkheimer WSJ article from 2008
Poiger, “Rock 'n' Roll, Female Sexuality, and the Cold War Battle over German Identities”®

1-pg Advertisement Assessment due Monday, December 1st

December 8-12: Consuming in the European Union
Discussion: How we Survived Communism
Lecture 2: The Euro and the Global Market
Lecture 3: Course Summary and final exam review
Readings: Economist articles in course reader

FINAL EXAM SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14th