Economics has at least three divisions: production, distribution and consumption. Of material goods we are not all producers or distributors, but we are all consumers… Consumption is the area within which each individual can affect the economic life of the community. Small as his own share may be, that is the area within which every person can exercise his control over the forces of economic production and distribution. If he regards himself as responsible for our joint economic welfare, he has a duty to think about and decide upon and adhere to a standard of consumption for himself and his family.

Richard Gregg, “The Value of Voluntary Simplicity” (1936)

[Commercialism is not making us behave against our “better judgment.” Commercialism is our better judgment. Not only are we willing to consume, and not only does consuming make us happy, “getting and spending” is what gives our lives order and purpose.

James Twitchell, Lead Us Into Temptation (1999)

Goods are neutral. Their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges.

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood [(1979) 1996]

Contemporary Western societies are often characterized as places where the process of accumulating and consuming material goods plays an outsized role in shaping individuals, economies and cultures. Consumerism— the linking of happiness, freedom, and economic prosperity with the purchase and consumption of goods—has long been taken for granted as constitutive of the “good life” in these societies. Increasingly, global economic shifts have made it possible for some developing countries to engage in patterns of, and attitudes about, consumption similar to those in industrialized societies. According to the Worldwatch Institute, “One quarter of humanity—1.7 billion people worldwide—now belong to the ‘global consumer class,’ having adopted the diets, transportation systems and lifestyles that were once mostly limited to the rich nations of Europe, North America and Japan.” At the same time, however, nearly 3 billion people struggle to survive on less than $2 a day, while environmental degradation and mounting consumer debt expose the inequality and vulnerability of this system.

This course takes an international and interdisciplinary (sociology, anthropology, history, economics and popular media) approach to consumption and how it is understood in different societies. We explore consumption’s role in shaping racial, class and international boundaries and examine how consumption informs how people think of their identities, of success, failure and happiness. We engage the ethical, environmental and social justice implications of consumerism.

Our readings include cases from several regions including the US, Western Europe, China, and India. Our discussions focus on the theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence of readings. We make use of research reports on various aspects of consumption to introduce the kinds of research done in this field.

**Learning goals:** Full engagement with all elements of this class will yield an understanding of the development of consumer society, the uneven impact of modern forms of production and consumption on groups and individuals, within and between...
societies; and the effects of consumption on the environment, psychological and social well-being. Students will develop their writing abilities through a series of analytical papers. Students will gain deeper knowledge of social science research.

Part of our work throughout the semester will be to examine our own consumption habits in order to understand what consuming does for and to us. This will assist us in thinking through the complexities of changing those habits and in turn, systems of production and consumption. We’ll do this through a series of exercises including:

1) **How Green Are You?**: take the Greendex survey and bring results to class [http://event.nationalgeographic.com/greendex/calculator.html](http://event.nationalgeographic.com/greendex/calculator.html)

2) **In Just One Day**: a catalog of what you consumed in one day (food, heat, water, media) and wasted: what did you leave behind today (things bought, taken but not fully consumed). Could you reuse some of those things? To get a sense of what goes into what we consume, see Worldwatch Institute’s Good Stuff? guide: [http://www.worldwatch.org/taxonomy/term/44](http://www.worldwatch.org/taxonomy/term/44)

3) **Property List**: catalog all of your belongings

4) **How Much is That Stuff Really Costing You?**: Track your expenses for one week (every penny you spend). List your monthly recurring expenses. Bring results to class. Finally, read this blogpost [http://www.bravenewlife.com/06/how-i-pulled-in-my-early-retirement-by-20-years/](http://www.bravenewlife.com/06/how-i-pulled-in-my-early-retirement-by-20-years/)

5) **Buy Nothing Week**: Yes, you read that right. Buy nothing this week (beyond paying your bills). Did you go an entire week without shopping? How did you meet your needs? How difficult (or easy) was this? What did you learn about your habits?

6) **Back in the day**: can you recall one (a few? Several?) favorite toys from your childhood? What were they? How did you come to want them? How did you get them? What did they mean to you? Do you still have them?

**Grade Distribution**

Class participation: **25%**

Blog Posts: **15%**

Papers (3): **60%**

**Writing Assignments**: Assignments range between 6-15 pp.

- #1: Friday, October 9
- #2: Friday, October 30
- #3: Friday, Dec 18

**Classroom Policies:**

No laptops or phones—they’re too distracting to yourselves and others.

We incorporate writing into each class in response to a writing prompt. Be prepared with paper and a pen.

**Attendance**: Participation matters in this class. Articulating your ideas helps you to sharpen them and contributes to the quality of our collective experience. You can’t participate if you’re not in class.

**Academic Integrity**: Write your own ideas, in your own words, source others’ ideas appropriately and all will be well.

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website ([http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)).

**Late assignments**: All assignments should be posted to the NYU Classes site. Late papers will be penalized 1/3 grade for every day they’re late.
Final Paper option: In years past, some students have opted to do a paper based on experiments participating in alternative forms of (anti) consumption. If you would like to do so as well, you must engage in at least four weeks of fieldwork/experimenting. You will need to indicate to me what you plan to do no later than October 13 so that I can review and give you feedback on the project. Each requires keeping a journal, evidence of practice, and analysis of what you experienced using texts from class and outside the syllabus.

REQUIRED Books
Available at Bobst, NYU bookstore, order online, or share with each other
Bill McKibben, Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future (Holt 2007)
James Twitchell, Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism (Columbia 1999)
Zygmunt Bauman, Consuming Life
Elizabeth Chin, Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture
Ken Ilgunas, Walden on Wheels: On the Open Road from Debt to Freedom
Arlie Hochschild, The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in Market Times (Metropolitan 2012)
John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, Ethnicity, Inc. (Chicago 2009)
Golden Arches East: McDonalds in East Asia, ed. James Watson (Stanford 2006)
Mark Boyle The Moneyless Manifesto (available free online)
Van Jones Green Collar Economy
Robert and Edward Skidelsky, How Much is Enough?: Money and the Good Life
William Irvine, A Guide to the Good Life: the ancient art of stoic joy

FACEBOOK page: Consumerism NYU Gallatin Fall 2015
Please request to join this group. I will be posting relevant material to this site and invite you to do the same. Blog posts will be posted here.

Blogposts:
Each of you will write two blog posts this semester. These will be graded. I will provide guidelines designed to help you think critically about the reading and to catalyze our discussion. These should be posted to the Facebook page the Monday prior to class to which you are assigned to give us each a reasonable chance to read them before class.
Part 1: Consumption in Comparative Perspective

WEEK 1 Course introduction SEP 8

WEEK 2 Why Consumerism? Consumption, Production and their Limits SEP 15

McKibben, chapters 1-3 (128 pages)
Twitchell, Introduction and chapter 1, “Attention K Mart Shoppers”, pp.1-49 (49 pages)

(Exercise 1) How Green Are You?: take the Greendex survey and bring results to class
http://event.nationalgeographic.com/greendex/calculator.html

(Exercise 2) In Just One Day: a catalog of what you consumed in one day (food, heat, water, media) and wasted: what did you leave behind today (things bought, taken but not fully consumed. Could you reuse some of those things?) To get a sense of what goes into what we consume, see Worldwatch Institute’s Good Stuff? guide: http://www.worldwatch.org/taxonomy/term/44

WEEK 3: Changing Patterns of Consumption and Consumerism SEP 22

REVISITING KEYNES, Introduction and essay by Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren”, pp1-26 (26 pages)

Skidelsky and Skidelsky, How Much Is Enough?, intro and chapter 1, “Keynes’ Mistake”, pp.3-42 (39 pages)

P. Stearns, Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire (39 pages)
chapter 1, “Before Modern Consumerism,”,
chapter 2 “the Emergence of Consumerism”

Jaffrelot and van der Veer, Introduction, Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China (2008) pp. 11-31, (20 pages) [pdf]

DAVID GRAEBER http://www.filmsforaction.org/news/on_the_phenomenon_of_bullshit_jobs/

Mr. Money Mustache

(Exercise 3) Property List: a catalog of all your belongings:
In what ways is the list surprising?
How much of your possession is oriented toward leisure versus work, mementos of friends/family?
What is your most treasured object and why?
How would you feel if you had to give up that object?

WEEK 4: Self, Society and Stuff SEP 29
[ASSIGNMENT 1 HANDED OUT IN CLASS: DUE FRIDAY, OCT 9]

Zygmunt Bauman, Consuming Life, entire
Exercise 4: How Much is That Stuff Really Costing You?: Track your expenses for one week (every penny you spend). List your monthly recurring expenses. Bring results to class. Finally, read these blogposts http://www.bravenewlife.com/06/how-i-pulled-in-my-early-retirement-by-20-years/

Part 2: Consumption, Desire, and Meaning

WEEK 5: Advertising and Marketing in the Creation of Need and Desire OCT 6


GUEST SPEAKERS: The bloggers Mr. and Mrs. Frugalwoods will join us for a discussion of frugal living in an age of hyperconsumption. Making the connection between lifestyle, debt, and the good life. Note: Mark your calendars! Wed, Oct 7, twenty-something blogger, Broke Millenial, will be presenting at Gallatin on financial literacy. She’s great

Exercise 5: Buy Nothing Week: Yup, buy nothing this week. Did you go an entire week without shopping? How did you meet your needs? How difficult (or easy) was this? What did you learn about your habits?

[WEEK 6: FALL BREAK, NO CLASS OCT 13]

WEEK 7: Consumption, Status and Identity I: race, class and kids OCT 20

Elizabeth Chin, Purchasing Power, entire

(Exercise 6) Back in the day: can you recall one (a few? Several?) favorite toys from your childhood? What were they? How did you come to want them? How did you get them? What did they mean to you? Do you still have them? Draw from the readings in crafting your response (2 pages)

WEEK 8 Intimate Life in Market Times/Debt and Consumption OCT 27

[ASSIGNMENT#2 announced: DUE OCT 31]

Arlie Hochschild, The Outsourced Self, pages TBD.

Ken Ilgunas, Walden on Wheels: On the Open Road from Debt to Freedom, Intro, chapter 1, and Parts III and IV (115 pp)

Page | 5
Mark your calendar: Wednesday, October 28, 6pm, Ken Ilgunas speaking at Gallatin

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Part 3: Global interconnectivities: identity, ethnicity, trade and fantasy

WEEK 9: NOV 3
Commodification of culture and ethnofutures
Comaroff and Comaroff, Ethnicity, Inc. pp.1-116

Culture, “authenticity” and branding
Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling, chapter 4 “Consumption: Guinness, Ballygowan and Riverdance: The Globalisation of Irish Identity” in Cosmopolitan Ireland: Globalisation and Quality of Life, pp.76-103 (27 pages) [reader]

WEEK 10: How Brands Travel NOV 10
Differing ways that a global brand is used and understood by consumers across societies

Golden Arches East (entire)

Marilyn Halter, “The New Ethnic Marketing Experts” ch. 3 in Shopping for Identity, pp. 48-77 (30 pages) [pdf]

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PART 4: Evaluating Alternatives
Live Simply so Others May Simply Live? How?

WEEK 11: Are We Happy Yet? NOV 17
[ASSIGNMENT 3 HANDED OUT: DUE DEC 18]

Tim Kasser, The High Price of Materialism, (entire; 112 pages)


WEEK 12: NOV 24  THANKSGIVING POTLUCK (my apartment)
Communes, Tiny Homes and “Extreme” Early Retirement, or Revisiting Keynes, Indeed

Skidelsky and Skidelsky, chapter 7, “Exits from the Rat Race”, pp. 180-218 (38 pages)

WATCH: We The Tiny House People (you tube, Kirsten Dirksen (1:21:47)

Early Retirement:

Page 6
Back to the Land: Jim Windolf, “Sex, Drugs and Soybeans”, Vanity Fair, April 5, 2007
Story on long-standing commune “The Farm” in Tennessee

WEEK 13: The Ethics of Consumption and Curbing Desire DEC 1

Richard Gregg, “The Value of Voluntary Simplicity” (1936),
http://www.soilandhealth.org/03sov/0304spiritpsych/030409simplicity/SimplicityFrame.html (online)

William Irvine, A Guide to the Good Life: the ancient art of stoic joy (entire, but esp. chapters 1-7, 14, 15)

http://www.mrmoneymustache.com/2011/10/02/what-is-stoicism-and-how-can-it-turn-your-life-to-solid-gold/

Stephanie Kaza, “Penetrating the Tangle” in Hooked: Buddhist Writing on Greed, Desire and the Urge to Consume, pp. 139-151 (12 pages)

WEEK 14: Living without money DEC 8

Mark Boyle, The Moneyless Manifesto, entire

Recommended:
Peter Singer, “Family, Affluence and Morality”, 1972
http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1972----.htmlhttp://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1972----.htm

WEEK 15 Conclusion Dec 15

McKibben, chapter 4 – end, pp.129-232 (approx. 100 pages)

[ Final Assignment due DEC 18]
Recommended:
Classic social theory and social science texts:
John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*
Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*
Nietszche, *Genealogy of Morals*
Thorstein Veblen, *A Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)
Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*
Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*

See also, Max Horkheimer
Theodor Adorno
Paul Lafargue’s “The Right to Be Lazy” 1883 (Marx’s son in law)

Contemporary consumerism texts:
James Livingston, *Against Thrift: Why Consumer Culture is Good for the Economy, the Environment, and Your Soul*
Benjamin Barber, *Consumed*
Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids*
Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (California 1997)
Viviana Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy*
Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*
William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke*
Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*
Denise Brennan, *What’s Love Got to Do With It: Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic.*
Naomi Klein *No Logo*
Hank Willis Thomas, *Pitch Blackness*
Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power*

Research Reports:
Pew Research Reports, August 22, 2012
http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/22/the-lost-decade-of-the-middle-class/
The report raises questions about “lifestyle” and what constitutes a middle class life as the relative economic gains of US middle class families have declined over the last decade. Read especially the Overview and Executive Summary.

Pew Research Center, Social and Demographic Trends, “Inside the Middle Class: Bad Times Hit the Good Life”
http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/706/middle-class-poll

Film and Video:
NPR documentary series on http://www.insideout.org/documentaries/middleclass/default.asp
Film: Cesky Sen based on consumerism in Czech republic post revolution
The Persuaders, Frontline, PBS
**Frontline; Merchants of Cool**
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/
*Black Mirror*, Season 1, Episode 2, “Fifteen Million Ments”
Reverend Billy Christmas special: Shopocalypse
*Wasteland*, documentary film