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

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%
Group Project: 15%
Writing Assignments (3): 60%

**Group Project**

This assignment has two parts. The first part requires you to venture in groups to sites around the city to analyze the ways that aspects of consumerism are represented and/or enacted. Each site is different and will focus more or less specifically on the themes we are studying (more details on specifics to come). You will have an opportunity to sign up for a site in the coming weeks. The second part of the project is the presentation of your findings to the class (including visuals) and a short written analysis of your findings. This presentation should be roughly 20 minutes long and should in some way involve our readings and each member of the group. We will begin weekly class presentations of group projects mid-semester.

**Writing Assignments**: Assignments range between 6-10pp.

- #1: Friday, February 27
- #2: Friday, March 27
- #3: Wednesday, May 15

**Classroom Policies:**

**No laptops or phones**—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, many students have opted to do a participant-observation oriented paper. If you choose that option, you must engage in at least four weeks of fieldwork/experimenting. I will hand out list of possible options in upcoming weeks to give you a sense of what I mean and so that you can begin to plan your time. Each requires keeping a journal, evidence of practice, and analysis of what you experienced using texts from class and outside syllabus). Declare project by Spring Break

REQUIRED Books
Available at Bobst, NYU bookstore, or order online
- 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
- Allison Pugh, Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture (UC Press 2009)
- 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 Sundeen, The Man Who Quit Money (Riverhead 2012)
- Van Jones Green Collar Economy
  - Juliet Schor, Plenitude: True Wealth (paperback)
  - Revisiting Keynes: Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren, ed. Lorenzo Pecchi and Gustavo Piga
  - 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
  - Epictetus, Enchiridion (also known as Handbook)

Blogroll:
Mr. Money Mustache
Bravenewlife.com
The Frugalwoods
Dollars and Sense: Real World Economics
Early Retirement Extreme
Zen Habits

Playlist?: I invite you to contribute suggestions for songs relevant to the themes we're studying.

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

***
Part 1: Consumption in Comparative Perspective

WEEK 1 Course introduction JAN 28

WEEK 2 Why Consumerism? Consumption, Production and their Limits FEB 4

McKibben, entire (225 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 FEB 11

REVISITING KEYNES, Introduction and essay by Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren”, pp1-26 (26 pages)
Robert Solow, “Whose Grandchildren?”, pp 87-93 (6 pages)
Richard Freeman, “Why do we work more than Keynes expected?”, pp135-142 (7 pages)
Robert Frank, “Context is More Important than Keynes Realized”, 143-150 (7 pages)

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

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


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/

(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 FEB 18

[ASSIGNMENT 1 HANDED OUT IN CLASS: DUE FRIDAY, FEB 27]

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 this blogpost 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 FEB 25


Xun Zhou, “Eat, Drink and Sing, and Be Modern and Global: Food, Karaoke and ‘Middle Class’ Consumers in China” in Jaffrelot and van der Veer, pp. 170-185 (15 pages) [pdf]

Exercise 5: Buy Nothing Week: Yup, 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?

WEEK 6: Consumption, Status and Identity I: race, class and kids MAR 4

Allison Pugh, Longing and Belonging, 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 7 Intimate Life in Market Times MAR 11
[ASSIGNMENT#2 announced: DUE MAR 27]

GUEST SPEAKERS: The bloggers Mr. and Mrs. Frugalwoods and Broke Millenial will join us for a discussion of frugal living in an age of hyperconsumption. Making the connection between lifestyle, debt, and the good life.

Arlie Hochschild, The Outsourced Self, pages TBD.

WEEK 8: SPRING BREAK!!! MAR 18

***

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

WEEK 9: MAR 25
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]

Marilyn Halter, “The New Ethnic Marketing Experts” ch. 3 in Shopping for Identity, pp. 48-77 (30 pages) [pdf]
WEEK 10: How Brands Travel APR 1
[Differing ways that a global brand is used and understood by consumers across societies
Golden Arches East (selections)]


Kim DaCosta, “Interracial Intimacy on the Commodity Frontier” [pdf]

***

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

WEEK 11: Are We Happy Yet? APR 8
[ASSIGNMENT 3 HANDED OUT: DUE MAY 15]

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


WEEK 12: APR 15

Epictetus, Enchiridion (also know as Handbook)

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


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

WEEK 13: The Ethics of Consumption and Dilemmas of Anti-Consumerism APR 22

Mark Sundeen, *The Man Who Quit Money* (Riverhead 2012)

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

Peter Singer, “Family, Affluence and Morality”, 1972
[http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1972----.htm](http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1972----.htm)

WEEK 14 Tiny Homes and “Extreme” Early Retirement, or Revisiting Keynes, Indeed APR 29
Guest speaker: Professor Louise Harpman

Blogposts from mrmoneymustache.com and earlyretirementextreme (TBD)

Juliet Schor, Plenitude: The New Economic of True Wealth (selections TBD)


Jim Windolf, “Sex, Drugs and Soybeans”, Vanity Fair, April 5, 2007
http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/05/thefarm200705
Story on long-standing commune “The Farm” in Tennessee

(Recall Twitchell’s critique from week 1 readings)

WEEK 15 MAY 8
Skidelsky and Skidelsky, chapter 7, “Exits from the Rat Race”, pp. 180-218 (38 pages)

Van Jones, Green Collar Economy, entire

[ Final Assignment due MAY 15]
Recommended:
Classic social theory and social science texts:
John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*
Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*
Nietzsche, *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:
Film: Cesky Sen based on consumerism in Czech republic post revolution
The Persuaders, *Frontline*, PBS
*Frontline; Merchants of Cool*
*Black Mirror*, Season 1, Episode 2, “Fifteen Million Merits”
Reverend Billy Christmas special: Shopocalypse
*Wasteland*, documentary film

Scott and Helen Nearing, *The Good Life Center*