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]) 1995

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 case studies from the US, China, India, and other regions of the world. 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.
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 and to assist us in thinking through the complexities of changing those habits. We’ll do this through a series of exercises including:

1) **Property List**: catalog all of your belongings
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
3) **How Green Are You?**: take the Greendex survey and bring results to class http://event.nationalgeographic.com/greendex/calculator.html
4) **Back in the day**: can you recall one (a few?) 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?
5) **Branded**: make a list of your favorite brands of the following products: toothpaste, shampoo, jeans, sneakers, and cars. Why do you like these and not others? If you don’t favor a particular brand, why not?

**Grade Distribution**

- Class participation: 20%
- Writing Assignments (3): 60%
- Group Project: (20%)

**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. See also Gallatin’s policy on academic integrity: http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/graduate/academic-integrity.html

**Late assignments**: Late papers will be penalized 1/3 grade for every day they’re late.

**Writing Assignments**: Assignments range between 6-10pp.
- #1: Friday, October 12
- #2: Friday, November 9
- #3: Tuesday, December 18

**Group Project**

This project 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 each member of the group. We will begin weekly class presentations of group projects in Week 8 and continue until the end of the semester.

**REQUIRED Books**

- Available at Bobst, NYU bookstore, Shakespeare books or order online
  - Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*
  - Juliet Schor, *Born To Buy* (Scribner 2004)
  - Mark Sundeen, *The Man Who Quit Money* (Riverhead 2012)
  - Van Jones *Green Collar Economy* (online or library)

**FACEBOOK page**: Consumerism in Comparative Perspective

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 SEP 4

WEEK 2 Why Consumerism? SEP 11
McKibben, Introduction and Chapter 1, “After Growth,” pp.1-45 (45 pages)

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

(Exercise 1) 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?

Recommended:
Henry James The Ambassadors or The Bostonians
Thorstein Veblen, A Theory of the Leisure Class (1899)
Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste
Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption, 2nd ed. Preface, i-xv;
Introduction to the 1996 edition xx-xxvii (22 pages) [reader]

WEEK 3: Consumption, Production and their Limits SEP 18
McKibben, chapter 2-end pp. 46-232 (180 pages)

(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 4: Self, Society and Stuff SEP 25
Zygmunt Bauman, Consuming Life, entire

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.

Recommended:
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
NPR documentary series on http://www.insideout.org/documentaries/middleclass/default.asp
Drew Carey video on lifestyle consumption and perception of the good life:
http://www.insideout.org/documentaries/middleclass/ptIV.asp (approx 8 minutes)
Schumacher, chapter 4, “Buddhist Economics” and chapter 5 “A Question of Size” in Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered, pp.56-80 (26 pages) [reader]
Part 2: Consumption, Desire, and Meaning

WEEK 5: Advertising and Marketing in the Creation of Need and Desire OCT 2 9 [Professor Stephen Duncombe]
Twitchell, chapter 2, "The Language of Things", pp. 59-89 (19 pages)
Robert Goldstein and Stephen Papson, "Advertising in the Age of Accelerated Meaning" (1996) in Schor and Holt, pp. 81-98 (17 pages) [reader]
Schor, Born to Buy, Chapters 1-6, pp. 9-117 (108 pages)
Recommended:
The Persuaders, Frontline, PBS
Frontline; Merchants of Cool
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/

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WEEK 6: Changing Patterns of Consumption and Consumerism OCT 2 9 [Dalton Conley, Professor of Sociology]
[ASSIGNMENT 1 HANDED OUT IN CLASS: DUE OCT 12]

Jaffrelot and van der Veer, Introduction, Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China (2008) pp. 11-31, (20 pages) [reader]
(Exercise 3) How Green Are You?: take the Greendex survey and bring results to class
http://event.nationalgeographic.com/greendex/calculator.html

Recommended:
John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society
Stephanie McCrummen, "In Africa a New Middle Income Consumerism" September 1, 2008 (Uganda)
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/31/AR2008093102083.html
Wasteland (doc film)

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WEEK 7: MID SEMESTER BREAK OCT 16 [NO Class]

WEEK 8: Intimate Life in Market Times OCT 23 [Eric Klinenberg, Professor of Sociology]
Arlie Hochschild, The Outsourced Self, entire.

WEEK 9: Consumption as a tool for managing relationships OCT 30 [Patrick McCreery, PhD]
[ASSIGNMENT #2 HANDED OUT IN CLASS: DUE NOV 9]
Allison Pugh, Longing and Belonging, entire

(Exercise 4) 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.
Recommended:
Eva Illouz, Consuming the Romantic Utopia (California 1997)
Pamela Uberti, “Aspirational Weddings: The Bridal Magazine and the Canons of ‘Decent Marriage’” (on Indian weddings) in Jaffrelot and van der Veer et. al., pp. 230-262 (32 pages) [reader]
Viviana Zelizer, The Purchase of Intimacy
Marcel Mauss, The Gift

WEEK 10: Consumption, status and identity NOV 6

(Exercise 5) Branded: make a list of your favorite brands of the following products: toothpaste, shampoo, jeans, sneakers, and cars. Why do you like these and not others? If you don’t favor a particular brand, why not?

Twitchell, chapter 5, The Branding of Experience and chapter 6, “The Function of Fashion in an Age of Individualism”, pp. 159-232 (72 pages)

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) [reader]


Recommended:
Naomi Klein No Logo
Hank Willis Thomas, Pitch Blackness
Elizabeth Chin, Purchasing Power
Radio report: on the luxury goods market and how much of the production of European brands like Louis Vuitton, Prada, etc. done in China
http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2009/02/02/pm_made_in_china/

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

WEEK 11: How Brands Travel NOV 13

Differing ways that a global brand is used by consumers across societies
Golden Arches East (selections)

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]

Kim DaCosta, selection from Black Magic

Film (in class): “100% Indian Hair” by Caleb Frankin

Recommended:
Marilyn Halter, “The New Ethnic Marketing Experts” ch. 3 in Shopping for Identity, pp. 48-77 (30 pages) [reader]
NPR article on African American targeted McDonald’s ads
http://www.npr.org/blogs/newsandviews/2008/12/mcdonalds_going_too_far_to мар.html?sc=ema
William Mazzarella, Shoveling Smoke
Livio Sansone. Chapter 2 “A Contested Icon” and Chapter 3 “The Local and the Global in Today’s Afro-Bahia” (34 pages)
Mimi Sheller’s Consuming the Caribbean
Denise Brennan’s What’s Love Got to Do With It: Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic.
Pali Nyit, “A Requiem for Songpan, or Once More about China’s Civilizing Mission,” pp.140-156 in Jeffrelot and van der Veer, et. al. (16 pages) [reader]
“The Bonfire of China’s Vanities” by PANKAJ MISHRA, NY Times, January 23, 2009: profile of Chinese novelist Yu Hua whose novel Brothers deals with social change and the consequences of consumerism in China
“US Vacation Spots Market to Chinese”
http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2009/02/03/chinese_tourists/

WEEK 12: THANKSGIVING week, no class NOV 20

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

WEEK 13: Are We Happy Yet? NOV 27
[ASSIGNMENT 3 HANDED OUT: DUE DEC 18]
Tim Kasser, The High Price of Materialism, (entire; 112 pages)


Reverend Billy Christmas special: Shopocalypse

Recommended:
http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/bhutan/gnh.html
PBS documentary on Bhutan whose King proposed “gross national happiness” as the best measure of a society’s well-being. Includes story on the impact of television and the internet on Bhutanese society one year after their introduction.

Daniel Gilbert, Stumbling on Happiness for a counterintuitive argument about the psychological basis of happiness

WEEK 14: The Ethics of Consumption and Dilemmas of Anti-Consumerism DEC 4
Mark Sundeen, The Man Who Quit Money (Riverhead 2012)

Richard Gregg, “The Value of Voluntary Simplicity” (1936),
http://www.soilandhealth.org/03sov/0304spiritpsych/030408simplicity/SimplicityFrame.html (online)

Recommended:
Stephanie Kaz, “Penetrating the Tangle” in Hooked: Buddhist Writing on Greed, Desire and the Urge to Consume, pp. 139-151 (12 pages)
WEEK 15 More alternatives DEC 11
Van Jones, Green Collar Economy

Kozinets, Robert V.1 r-kozinets@kellogg.nwu.edu, Journal of Consumer Research; Jun2002, Vol. 29 Issue 1, p20-38, 19 pages

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)

Recommended:
Joel Berg, All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America? Seven Stories Press (2008); see especially ch 13, "Bolstering Community
Food Production and Marketing"
The Business of Doing Good: interview with good magazine founder Jonathan Greenblatt
http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/business_of_good/
Urban farming as salve for involuntary simplicity: http://www.urbanfarming.org/
Vertical farming http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Scs2StelkkM&NR=1
Majora Carter, "Greening the Oiello" TED talk 2006