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21H.206 American Consumer Culture
Fall 2007

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Professor Meg Jacobs
Fall 2001

MW 11-12:30

21H.206: AMERICAN CONSUMER CULTURE

This class examines how and why twentieth-century Americans came to define the "good life" through consumption, leisure, and material abundance. We will explore how such things as department stores, nationally advertised brand-name goods, mass-produced cars, and suburbs transformed the American economy, society, and politics. The course is organized both thematically and chronologically. Each period deals with a new development in the history of consumer culture. Throughout we explore both celebrations and critiques of mass consumption and abundance.

The requirements for this class include two take-home papers based on the readings and lectures (25% each), one document collection (20%), one book review (20%) and class participation (10%). Throughout the semester, students will be expected to have completed the readings before class and come prepared to engage in discussion.

Readings will include novels and non-fiction books. All materials are available for purchase at the MIT bookstore:

Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (1900)
Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt (1922)
Vance Packard, Status Seekers (1959)
David Brooks, Bobos in Paradise (2000)

Week One: Introduction to the World of Goods

Wed. Sept. 5

Part I: The Rise Of A Mass Market At The Turn Of The Century

Week Two: Downtown Shopping

Mon. Sept. 10-Wed. Sept. 12

Dreiser, Sister Carrie, chps. 1-3, 5-8

Week Three: Leisure Time

Wed. Sept. 19

Dreiser, Sister Carrie, chps. 10,12-14,16, 20-21, 23-27

Week Four: The Business of Consumption

Mon. Sept 24.-Wed. Sept 26

Dreiser, Sister Carrie, chps. 28-39, 42, 44-47

Document Collection One Due Sept. 26

Part II: Making A Middle-Class Society In Interwar America

Week Five: Roaring Twenties

Mon. Oct. 1-Wed. Oct. 3
Lewis, Babbitt, chps. 1-7

Week Six: Advertising the American Dream
Wed. Oct. 10
Lewis, Babbitt, chps. 8-18

Week Seven: Advertising the American Dream continued
Mon. Oct. 15-Wed. Oct. 17
Lewis, Babbitt, chps. 19-34
Document Collection Two Due Oct 15

Week Eight: Abundance and Its Critics (I)
Mon. Oct. 22-Wed. Oct. 24
Mid-term Paper due Oct. 24

Part III: Mass Culture In Postwar America

Week Nine: Status Seeking in the Suburbs
Mon. Oct. 29-Wed. Oct. 31
Packard, Status Seekers, chps. 1-7

Week Ten: Malling of America
Mon. Nov. 5-Wed. Nov. 7
Packard, Status Seekers, chps. 9-12, 20-21

Week Eleven: Age of Television
Wed. Nov. 14
Packard, Status Seekers, chps. 17-19, 22, 24

Week Twelve: Segmenting Markets
Mon. Nov. 19-Wed. Nov. 21
Packard, Status Seekers, chps. 13-14
Book Review One Due Nov. 19

Part IV: Conspicuous Consumption at Century's End

Week Thirteen: McDonalds, Microwaves, and the Mega-Rich
Mon. Nov. 26-Wed. Nov. 28
Brooks, Bobos, chps. 1-3

Week Fourteen: Abundance And Its Critics (II)
Mon. Dec. 3-Wed. Dec. 5
Brooks, Bobos, chps. 4-7
Book Review Two due

Week Fifteen: E-Bay and Beyond
Mon. Dec. 10-Wed. Dec. 12
Final Paper Due Dec. 12