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21H.206 American Consumer Culture
Fall 2007

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Massachusetts Institute of Technology
M, 3-5, Spring 2007

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 are a primary sources journal (25%), class discussion (25%) and a final research paper (50%). Throughout the semester, students will be expected to have completed the readings before class, gather primary sources, 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)
Eric Schlosser, Fast Food Nation (2001)

Week One: Introduction to the World of Goods

February 12

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

Week Two: Downtown Shopping

February 20

Dreiser, Sister Carrie, chps. 1-3, 5-8, 10, 12-14,

Week Three: Leisure Time

February 26

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

Week Four: The Business of Consumption

March 5

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

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

Week Five: Roaring Twenties
March 12
Lewis, Babbitt, chps. 1-7

Week Six: Advertising the American Dream
March 19
Lewis, Babbitt, chps. 8-18

Week Seven: Abundance and Its Critics (I)
April 2
Lewis, Babbitt, chps. 19-34

Part III: Mass Culture In Postwar America

Week Eight: Status Seeking in the Suburbs
April 9
Packard, Status Seekers, chps. 1-7, 9-12, 20-21

Week Nine: Age of Television
April 23
Packard, Status Seekers, chps. 13-14, 17-19, 22, 24

Part IV: Conspicuous Consumption at Century's End

Week Ten: McDonalds, Microwaves, and the Mega-Rich
April 30
Schlosser, Fast Food Nation, Part I

Week Eleven: Abundance And Its Critics (II)
May 7
Schlosser, Fast Food Nation, Part II

Week Twelve: E-Bay and Beyond
May 14

Final Paper Due May 16