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)

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

Week Three: Leisure Time
Wed. Sept. 19

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
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
Lewis, *Babbitt*, chps. 19-34

*Document Collection Two Due Oct 15*

Week Eight: Abundance and Its Critics (I)

*Mid-term Paper due Oct. 24*

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**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

Week Twelve: Segmenting Markets
Mon. Nov. 19-Wed. Nov. 21
Packard, *Status Seekers*, chps. 13-14

*Book Review One Due Nov. 19*

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**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

*Final Paper Due Dec. 12*