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 one web-based project (25%), class discussion (25%) and a final research paper (50%). 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)
Walter Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: the Transformation of Selling in America*

**Week One: Introduction to the World of Goods**
September 13

**Part I: The Rise Of A Mass Market At The Turn Of The Century**
Week Two: Downtown Shopping
September 20
Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, chps. 1-3, 5-8

Week Three: Leisure Time
September 27

Week Four: The Business of Consumption
October 4:
Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, chps. 28-39, 42, 44-47
**Part II: Making A Middle-Class Society In Interwar America**

Week Five: Roaring Twenties  
October 18  
Lewis, *Babbitt*, chps. 1-7

Week Six: Advertising the American Dream  
Wed. October 25  
Lewis, *Babbitt*, chps. 8-18

Week Seven: Abundance and Its Critics (I)  
November 1  
Lewis, *Babbitt*, chps. 19-34

**Part III: Mass Culture In Postwar America**

Week Eight: Status Seeking in the Suburbs  
November 8  
Packard, *Status Seekers*, chps. 1-7, 9-12, 20-21

Week Nine: Age of Television  
November 15  

**Part IV: Conspicuous Consumption at Century’s End**

Week Ten: McDonalds, Microwaves, and the Mega-Rich  
November 22  
Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, Part I

Week Eleven: Abundance And Its Critics (II)  
November 29  
Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, Part II

Week Twelve: E-Bay and Beyond  
December 6

**Final Paper Due Dec. 9**