

UNLEARNING CONSUMERISM

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Tues 2:00-4:45
L/L B101

Through readings, student-led research, and weekly “lab” exercises, we will study the face of consumerism both personally and in the context of globalization as it impacts the environment. Looking at recent research, websites, and our own personal habits, we will evaluate social, environmental and psychological impacts of consumerism and materialist values. We will test some tools for analysis of consumption, consider ethical guidelines for personal and institutional choices, and review initiatives for how to move to a less consumptive society.

Course Purpose:

- 1) to understand the scale and environmental impact of global consumption;
- 2) to assess personal levels of consumption and develop criteria for ethical purchasing;
- 3) to evaluate root social and economic behaviors that drive consumerism;
- 4) to consider structural and global ways to reduce overconsumption.

Course Texts:

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| 1) STUFF | <u>Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things</u> , John Ryan & Alan Durning |
| 2) WORLD | <u>State of the World 2004: Special Focus on Consumerism</u> (2004) |
| 3) GUIDE | <u>The Consumer’s Guide to Effective Environmental Choices</u> ,
Michael Brower & Warren Leon (1999) |
| 4) FOOD | <u>Is Our Food Safe?</u> , Warren Leon & Caroline Smith DeWaal (2002) |
| 5) Reader | A collection of articles available in the Bittersweet |

Starter Websites

Center for New American Dream	www.newdream.org
Worldwatch Institute	www.worldwatch.org
Union of Concerned Scientists	www.ucsus.org
Environmental Protection Agency	www.epa.gov
Center for Science in the Public Interest	www.cspinet.org

Course Outline:

JAN	18	Environmental Impacts of Consumerism Introductions
	25	Global patterns of consumption <u>DUE</u> : Lab 1 “Stuff” reflections
FEB	1	The Big Five and their Relative Impacts: Transportation, Energy <u>DUE</u> : Lab 2 Property List, Autobiography
	8	Water and Waste <u>DUE</u> : Lab 3 Energy Assessment

Assignments:

STUFF: all chapters; WORLD ch 1,
GUIDE ch 1; Reader: McKibben

GUIDE pp 43-58, 64-73
WORLD ch 2; Reader: Dittmar

GUIDE ch 2, pp 73-80
WORLD ch 3

	15	Food <u>DUE</u> : Lab 4 Food Log	FOOD ch 1, 2, 4, 6 WORLD ch 4; GUIDE pp 58-64
	22	What Drives Consumerism? Historical, Economic and Social Drivers <u>DUE</u> : Lab 5 Eco-labeling	Reader: Stearns, Gabriel &Lang ch 2
MAR	1	Town Meeting Day Waste Sort Lab (extra credit TBA)	<u>DUE</u> : Take-Home Exam #1
	8	Advertising, Television, and Shopaholism <u>DUE</u> : Lab 6 Unlearning TV	Reader: Gabriel &Lang ch 5, Durning, Grierson, Kanner & Gomes, Mate
	15	Moving Toward a Less Consumptive Society Critiques and Alternative Initiatives Jim Merkel, Radical Simplicity	Reader: Schudson, Camacho WORLD ch 8; GUIDE ch 4, 6, Epilogue
	22	Spring Break	
	29	Structural Incentives, Sustainable Business Richard Watts, Vermont Energy Initiatives <u>DUE</u> : Lab 7 Technology Fast, Critiques	WORLD ch 5, 7; GUIDE ch 7 Reader: Schor, Hollander
APR	5	Consumer Activism: Media/Advertising Liberation <u>DUE</u> : Lab 8 Consumption Log	Reader: Gabriel & Lang ch 9, Anatomy of an Ad
	12	Food: vegetarianism, organic agriculture, resistance to GMOs <u>DUE</u> : Personal Guidelines, draft	FOOD ch 3, 5, 7-9 Reader: Berry
	19	Green Building, Purchasing, Clothing ecological design <u>DUE</u> : Lab 9 Adbusters	WORLD ch 6; Reader: Schor, Simpson
	23	Earth Day	<u>DUE</u> : Awareness Projects
	26	Voluntary Simplicity Movement Spiritual & religious initiatives	Reader: Nhat Hanh, Nash, Waskow
MAY	3	Great Giveaway Closing, Evaluations	<u>DUE</u> : Personal Guidelines, Self and Course Evaluation
	9	Finals Week	<u>DUE by 4pm</u> at Bittersweet: Take Home Exam #2

Assignments

- 1) Reading: This course is a seminar/workshop style course in which reading is central to the content. Several of the books are quick reads; we will go over the main concepts in class. You are expected to be acquainted with the reading before coming to class. For specific discussions, I will provide discussion questions to guide your reading. The exams will assume you have a thorough understanding of the readings.
- 2) Lab Exercises: There are nine “lab” exercises over the course of the semester, assigned and due on a more or less weekly basis. These require a range of data collection, math, and reflection on your results. Guidelines for the exercises will be given in class, often orally or on the blackboard, so you will need to be in class to get them. For your final grade, you may choose one write-up to be dropped from the total. Typed write-ups are preferred but neat handwriting will be accepted.
- 3) Projects: You will undertake a short group project developing an Earth Day awareness activity around the theme of consumption, working with the Environmental Council and student environmental groups. These may be tabling in front of the library or undertaking an advocacy project with a specific campus group before or during Earth Week.
- 4) Personal Guidelines: Over the semester, you should be making notes for developing your own personal guidelines for ethical consuming, drawing on values and principles explored in this class. These will be collated into a draft in early April and then revised by the end of the semester and shared with the group as witness to your “unlearning”.
- 5) Exams: Questions for the exams will be given out a week ahead of the due date. You will select three essays plus three short answer questions. All written work should be completed on a word processing program and handed in as a printed paper. Do not hand in disks or handwritten papers. [I will not read these submissions]. Double-space your papers, allowing normal 1.25" margins for comments. Number your pages, and staple all pages together. Check for computer errors, broken lines or unformatted paragraphs, and strange hyphenation. Spellcheck and proofread your work before handing it in. Be conscious of your use of gender pronouns and referents. Use "people" or "humankind" instead of "man", and "he or she" or "they" instead of simply "he".

Course Policies

Absences

Attendance will be taken, and unexcused absences will factor into your final grade. Since this class only meets once a week, missing one class is the equivalent of missing 2-3 classes of other courses. Even if you are feeling a little under the weather, make an effort to come to class and keep up with the course rhythm, even if you don't feel like talking. Absences are not “excused” unless they are personally cleared with me by phone or email. I expect you to make it a commitment to attend every class, both for your own personal learning, and to contribute to the community of learners in the group.

Late work

Turn work in on time, i.e. at the beginning of class on the day the assignment is due. Because there are weekly assignments, it will be very confusing if work comes in late. Late work is subject to penalties, the most important one being my lack of attention. Don't let your paper be the one buried in my pile of neglected mail! Your grade will drop a half grade each day the paper is late unless you have a medical excuse. If you need an extension due to illness or family emergency, please speak with me personally. I will do my best to read all the papers at once after they are turned in and try to return them to you within one-two weeks.

Plagiarism

I support UVM's commitment to academic honesty. This means your written words should be your own. If you draw on other sources, they should be cited properly to give adequate credit. If you work with other students to prepare for an exam, your written answers should be individually constructed, not copied from each other or shared notes. Work that appears to be plagiarized will be given no credit and students will be asked to meet with the instructor to explain the situation. Plagiarism at UVM is grounds for academic suspension; don't do it.

Grading

Your grade will be based on your written work, which will reflect your depth of engagement with the lab exercises, projects, as well as your thoughtful reflection on the two exams.

Lab exercises (8 @ 25 pts)	200 pts	Due weekly, as assigned in class
Earth Day project	50	Due on Earth Day
Personal guidelines	50	Draft due April 12th, final May 3rd
Take Home Exam #1	75	Due March 1st
Take-Home Exam #2	75	Due May 9th
Class Participation	<u>50</u>	
TOTAL	500	

*Extra credit: Extra effort can be put into your Earth Day project for additional points; also you may attend any of the ENVS Energy seminars (Tuesdays at 6:30 in John Dewey Lounge) and write up a brief summary and reflection for 10 pts. You may also write up other lectures, events, or videos that are relevant to the course.

Grading Philosophy

This course is about more than grades; it is about your personal understanding of the environmental impact of western consumption (including yours) and why it is critical for shifting to a more sustainable society in the future. I do not believe that grades are central to the learning experience but I will try to be fair, open, and communicative about the grading process. I will do my best to be clear about the assignments and my criteria for high quality work. If you are in trouble and falling behind for any reason, please come in and talk to me. Also, if you would like to rewrite any of your work (including exam questions), you may do so for regrading and additional credit.