Summary
Consumption practices in advanced, market societies seem to have replaced the importance of productive activities in the reproduction of the social order. Consumption has tended to cover a dual role: both economic (of course) and cultural (and this is a rather newer role). The importance of consumer goods and the meaning attached to consumption processes are by now fully recognized by the social sciences as important parts in the construction of our present realities. Consumerism pervades people’s everyday lives in the developed world and generates relative deprivation phenomena throughout. However the relationship between consumption and consumerism is not self-evident. The Course intends to discuss the relationship between ‘consumption’ and ‘consumerism’ broadly following the assumption that “while consumption is an act, consumerism may be perceived as a way of life”.

Course description
Displaying, having, desiring, buying and acquiring are important issues in the construction of our own social identities and in the kinds of relationships we have with one another as well as with the world environment. The Course draws on classical sociological statements, as well as more recent texts about consumer society through a multidisciplinary approach (anthropology, economics, historical research).

The notions of liberal democracy and of ‘sovereign consumers’ have long been intertwined in ways that make it difficult to separate them from the idea of progress. The output of the Industrial Revolution has combined itself with the outcome of a Consumer Revolution, both processes accompanying the making of contemporary global market societies. Today consumption practices largely develop within market situations regulated by a type of promotional culture that, by feeding on playfulness and spectacle, has become the model for (almost) all social relations – whilst, as it has been observed – new modes of domination tend to substitute ‘repression’ with ‘seduction’. At the close of the first decade of the 21st C., we are being faced with phenomena that seem to span worldwide: we might frame them under the caption “globalization and its discontents”. It is beyond the scope of the Course to draw a picture of the consequences of the 2008 financial and credit crunch: however recent history is providing us with the (ironic) opportunity for understanding the mechanisms that have been operating within consumer societies. The Course might stimulate fresh reflection about the re-dressing of an established paradigm that has been accompanying the many decades following World War Two.

By the end of the Course students should have achieved: a) a knowledge about the making of consumer culture, its historical development and dynamics; b) the links existing between global issues and everyday consumer practices; c) an ability to understand the extent to which our lives seem to be guided by apparently ‘insatiable’ needs; and finally d) an awareness about the new global challenges that indiscriminate consumerism may pose to the world order.
Course requirements

Class participation (30% of grade – “class participation” is assessed through the various activities listed under this heading: #1 through #3).
1. From week to week different students (up to a max of three per week) will be made responsible for stimulating in-class discussions on topics touched upon by the assigned readings. A list of topics will be handed out during the first meeting of classes in order for students to sign up.
2. Un-announced quizzes that may take place during classes.
3. Site visits and Field Trip attendance are mandatory and should be all followed by written reports (2 pages each). Make sure not to miss these opportunities!! MAKE-UPS for Site Visits and Field Trip are discouraged.

Mid-term: a take-home written paper on assigned topic (25% of grade, approx. 8 pages).

Final paper: research project and take-home written paper on topic agreed upon with the instructor (40% of grade, 10 pages). The final paper outline is to be handed in by early April. The Final Paper should be complete of bibliographical references, online resources used etc.

Written weekly report
Each week students should access the online Lempert Report—Marketing analysis, issues and trends and retrieve those informations that may allow them to write a 2-page report about what appears to them the ‘hottest’ issue of the week. (plempert@lempertreport.com)

Class attendance is mandatory. Absences are to be justified beforehand with the instructor and the Office of Academic Support. No late “hand-ins” : assignments should be submitted in paper version and stapled. Half a point per day will be subtracted to the otherwise deserved grade. Other assignments are equally expected on time.

Required readings

Assigned papers are available online (via NYU Bobcat) or on Blackboard.
SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMERISM, Spring 2012

Schedule of Course /Topics and readings

1. Monday, January 30th, 2012 Discussion of Syllabus’ outline. Key terms and issues in the field of the sociology of consumption. Students’ sign-up for weekly discussion groups.

2. FRIDAY Feb. 3rd (Make-up class) SITE VISIT Gucci Museum, Piazza Signoria


4. Feb. 13th SITE VISIT During class hours, by private bus, visit the premises of MUKKILATTE in North-West Florence.

5. Feb 20th Topic: Toward a commodification of experience
   The session will deal with a discussion of the papers listed below as well as with a reflection about the apparently far-flung “needs” that drinking (water and milk) represent in contemporary consumer culture fashioning themselves as one of the foundations for specific lifestyles.
   Check various entries in Blue Planet Run 2007 and updates.
   http://blueplanetrun.org/water
   ** Site visit report due.

6. Feb 27th Topic: The making of consumers
7. March 5th

**Site visit** During class hours, Visit Headquarters of Uni-COOP (details tba)

> > > > >   MID TERM DUE   <<<<<<

SPRING BREAK 2012

8. March 19th

**Topic: Branding and its discontents**
The contemporary obsession with brands is linked with the workings of corporate economies and knowledge societies where signs and symbols have become intrinsic economic values.


**Site visit report due**

9. March 26th

**Topic: Advertising and visual consumption**
The discussion of advertising compels specific attention since one might argue that it is through advertising that goods acquire a desirable identity, and are communicated to the consumer/user.


10. March 30th **FRI DAY**

**Field Trip** Excursion to Prato. Full-day trip by private bus. Details tba

11. April 2nd

**Topic: Consumption, fashion and the creation of social identities**

Fashion has acquired an omni-pervasive quality: it's no longer just a matter of body presentation and social allure, but “being in” represents the moral dimension of individuals both in the public sphere and in their private lives.


**Field Trip Report due

12. April 16th

**Consumption, self and the Other(s)**

Consumption practices do not simply take place in the marketplace. They affect our own identities and shape the types of relationships we develop with other people and with the environment. Our behaviors - qua consumers - are also ethically relevant. The two following papers should provide a meaningful analytical tool.


13. April 23rd

**Topic: Paradigm change?**

The discussion should provide an opportunity for considering the present shifts at work in consumerist behavior. Consumption is here to stay? how could it become a user-friendly and ethic social disposition? What about consumers’ protests?

Selected topics from the online ADBUSTERS pages.

**Final paper outline due. Topic is to be chosen by students and agreed upon with instructor.**

14. April 30th

**Topic: In-class oral presentation of students’ projects**

15. May 7th

<<<<<< FINAL PAPER DUE >>>>>>>