PO 300

The Politics of Consumption

Boston University
MWF 4:40-5:30PM, Location: CAS B06A
Spring 2018

Contact Information

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Course description

This course examines the social, political, and economic determinants and consequences of our own behavior as consumers of goods and services. Among other topics, we consider the relationship between consumption and social status, political participation, transnational regulation, ethics, and business strategy. The course brings together research from a variety of disciplines including political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, and business management. By the end of the course, students will better understand the role they play as consumers in the political economy of the United States as well as in the wider global political economy.

Course requirements

This course will be run as a seminar. Students are expected to do all the readings and arrive at class prepared to discuss them. There will be two take home essays (1500 words for undergraduates, 2000 for graduate students, each worth 20 percent of the grade) and a final paper (worth 40 percent). Students will also be expected to make one oral presentation based on course readings, plus attend class regularly and participate in discussions (worth 20 percent of the grade). The paper (4000 words for undergraduates, 5000 words for graduate students) will be a research paper focused on an important issue with regard to consumption. Students will exchange and critique a one-page research
proposal with a partner. In the final week of the course, students will present preliminary findings from their research. Late papers without acceptable excuse or prior notification will be docked 3 percentage points per day. Students are also asked to keep a private journal to track their own personal consumption for at least the first two weeks of the course.

Important deadlines:

- Keep a private journal of your own personal consumption: Fri. 1/19 through Fri. 2/2
- Essay #1: Fri. 2/23
- Exchange research proposal with review partner: Fri. 3/16
- Provide feedback on your partner’s research proposal: Fri. 3/23
- Essay #2: Fri. 4/6
- Present preliminary research findings: Fri. 4/27, Mon. 4/30, or Wed. 5/2
- Research paper: Mon. 5/7

The College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Dean’s Office has requested that you be informed of the following: The last day you may drop the course without a ‘W’ grade is February 22. The last day you may drop the course with a ‘W’ grade is March 30.

You are responsible for knowing the provisions of the CAS Academic Conduct Code (copies are available in CAS 105). Cases of suspected academic misconduct will be referred to the Dean’s Office. See: http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/

Boston University is committed to providing equal access to our coursework and programs to all students, including those with disabilities. In order to be sure that accommodations can be made in time for all exams and assignments, please plan to turn in your accommodations letter as soon as possible after the first class, but no later than (ten days) from the first exam/assignment. After you turn in your letter, please meet with me to discuss the plan for accommodations so we can be sure that they are adequate and you are supported in your learning. If you have further questions or need additional support, please contact the Office of Disability Services (access@bu.edu), the Political Science advisor or the Pardee School Advisor.

Please regularly check the course web page for updates via https://learn.bu.edu/.

Required texts

Bartley, Tim, Sebastian Koos, Hiram Samel, Gustavo Setrini, and Nik Summers. 2015. Looking Behind the Label: Global Industries and the Conscientious Consumer. Bloomingon, IN:
Indiana University Press.


*Note: All other readings are available on our course website.*

**Course schedule**

1 **Introduction—What is consumption?**

*Fri. 1/19*

No readings assigned for this class.

*Mon. 1/22 — Discussion leader: None*

Required reading:

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

*Wed. 1/24 — Discussion leader: None*

Required reading:
- Miller, *Consumption and Its Consequences*, Chapter 3: “Why We Shop” and Chapter 4: “Why Denim?”

*Fri. 1/26 — Discussion leader: None*

Required reading:
Additional reading (required for graduate students):

2 Consumption and the economy

Mon. 1/29 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

Wed. 1/31 — Discussion leader: Catie
Required reading:
• Jean Tirole, Economics for the Common Good (Princeton University Press, 2017), Chapter 6: “Toward a Modern State.”

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

Fri. 2/2 — Discussion leader: Rickie
Required reading:

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

3 Consumption and social status

Mon. 2/5 — Discussion leader: Leo
Required reading:
Additional reading (required for graduate students):

**Wed. 2/7** — Discussion leader: Justin
Required reading:

**Fri. 2/9** — Discussion leader: Laura
Required reading:

**Mon. 2/12** — Discussion leader: Rachel
Required reading:

**Wed. 2/14** — Discussion leader: Andrew
Required reading:

**Fri. 2/16** — Discussion leader: Aram
Required reading:

### 4 Consumption and political participation

**Tue. 2/20** — Discussion leader: Jessica
Required reading:

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

**Wed. 2/21** — Discussion leader: James
Required reading:

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

Fri. 2/23 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:
• Stolle and Micheletti, Political Consumerism, Chapter 3: “Who Are Political Consumers?” and Chapter 4: “Mapping Political Consumerism in Western Democracies.”

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

Essay #1 due in class (submit via email).

Mon. 2/26 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:
• Stolle and Micheletti, Political Consumerism, Chapter 5: “The Organizational Setting for Political Consumerism” and Chapter 6: “Discursive Political Consumerism.”

Wed. 2/28 — Discussion leader: Charles
Required reading:

Fri. 3/2 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:
• Stolle and Micheletti, Political Consumerism, Chapter 8: “Political Consumerism’s Scope and Challenges.”

Spring Break

5 Local consumption

Mon. 3/12 — Discussion leader: Emma
Required reading:

Wed. 3/14 — Discussion leader: Roxanne
Required reading:
Fri. 3/16 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:

Exchange research proposal with review partner.

6 Consumption and transnational regulation

Mon. 3/19 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:

Wed. 3/21 — Discussion leader: Henry
Required reading:
  • Bartley et al., Looking Behind the Label, Chapter 1: “The Making of Conscientious Consumers” and Chapter 2: “The Dilemmas of Conscientious Consumerism.”

Fri. 3/23 — Discussion leader: Sabrina
Required reading:
  • Bartley et al., Looking Behind the Label, Chapters 3: “Wood and Paper Products: Search for Sustainability.”

Provide feedback on your partner’s research proposal.

Mon. 3/26 — Discussion leader: Leah
Required reading:
  • Bartley et al., Looking Behind the Label, Chapter 4: “Food: Global Agriculture and Local Institutions” and Chapter 5: “Apparel and Footwear: Standards for Sweatshops.”

Wed. 3/28 — Discussion leader: Ian
Required reading:
  • Bartley et al., Looking Behind the Label, Chapter 6: “Electronics: The Hidden Costs of Computing.”

Fri. 3/30 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:
  • Bartley et al., Looking Behind the Label, Conclusion: “Beyond Conscientious Consumerism.”

7 Consumption and ethics

Mon. 4/2 — Discussion leader: Andrada
Required reading:

**Wed. 4/4** — Discussion leader: Luna
Required reading:
• Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots*, Chapter 3: “When We Act against Our Own Ethical Values.”

**Fri. 4/6** — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:
• Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots*, Chapter 4: “Why You Aren’t as Ethical as You Think You Are.”

**Essay #2 due in class (submit via email).**

**Mon. 4/9** — Discussion leader: Pedro
Required reading:
• Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots*, Chapter 5: “When We Ignore Unethical Behavior” and Chapter 6: “Placing False Hope in the ‘Ethical Organization’.”

**Wed. 4/11** — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:
• Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots*, Chapter 7: “Why We Fail to Fix Our Corrupted Institutions.”

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

**Fri. 4/13** — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:

8 Ethical consumption and its critics

**Wed. 4/18** — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:

Additional reading (required for graduate students):

Fri. 4/20 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:
• Dauvergne and Lister, Eco-Business, Chapter 2: “The Eco-Business Setting.”

Mon. 4/23 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:

Wed. 4/25 — Discussion leader: None
Required reading:

9 Presentations

Fri. 4/27
No readings assigned for this class.

Mon. 4/30
No readings assigned for this class.

Wed. 5/2
No readings assigned for this class.

Research paper due by the end of Mon. 5/7 (submit via email).