

History 478: Commodities and Commoditization in US History

Professor Jason Petruilis
petruilis@oberlin.edu

Class hrs: W 7 PM-9 PM, King 121
Office hrs: W 9:30AM-11:30AM, Rice 305

“A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” – Karl Marx, *Capital*

Course description. What is a commodity? And how are objects, art, ideas, and even people commoditized? This course examines commodities and commoditization in historical and theoretical perspective, and analyzes how commodities fit into larger narratives of capitalism; globalization; (post-)colonialism; and production and consumption. Emphasizes reading and discussion, and prepares students to analyze commodities in their own research

Required texts.

- Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor*
- William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great American West*
- Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*
- William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*
- Pietra Rivoli, *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade* (Revised and Updated, 2009)

Additional readings will be posted to the course web site and are also available as library reserves. Please note that several books can be purchased as eBooks through Google or Amazon.

Learning objectives.

- Hone reading skills, including argument identification and strategic reading
- Develop research skills, including library use and record-keeping
- Analyze and contextualize primary sources; use primary sources in an original research paper
- Deploy secondary sources as support, not summary
- Construct an original argument, supported by primary source evidence and secondary source analysis
- Contribute to the community of the classroom through discussion, posting, and feedback
- Understand and problematize stuff and the networks of relationships, material, and meaning in which stuff is embedded
- Engage as citizens with contemporary and historical issues

Assignments.

- *Active, thoughtful, and engaged participation* (determines borderline grades): including a weekly, two-paragraph reading response, posted to the course web site by Wednesday at noon.
- *Paper 1: Seeing a thing.* A 3-5 page close analysis of an object. DUE FRI MAR 8 at 10 AM (email; 20% of grade)
- *Paper 2: Historiography of a thing.* A 3-5 page critical essay on the academic literature about a thing. DUE FRI APR 5 at 10 AM (email; 20% of grade)
- *Final paper:* The social life of a thing. A 9-12 page original research paper tracing a thing from production to consumption, drawing on primary and secondary materials. DUE MON MAY 13 at 9 AM: Final project (email; 60% of grade)

Additional details.

- Academic honesty. Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty are unacceptable, and easy to avoid. Familiarize yourself with Oberlin's [Honor Code](#), and ask me to clarify if you have any questions; ignorance is not an excuse. Per Oberlin honor code requirements, I will refer all suspected academic dishonesty to the appropriate dean. Offenders will receive a zero on the assignment and an F in the class.
- Accommodations. Please let me know about any issues or accommodations (activities, disability, religious, etc) during the first two weeks of class.
- Attendance. You are expected to attend every class session. You must inform me in a timely way if you have an excused absence, including religious holidays or extended/severe illness, which requires a note from the appropriate dean's office. Unexcused absences will result in a penalty of 1/3 grade against your overall grade.
- Communicating with the professor. Office hours are Wednesday, 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM. I am also available to chat immediately after class on Wednesdays. I respond to emails as quickly as possible, and at least once a day during the week. I do not check email regularly on weekends, vacations, or holidays. Email should be treated as business correspondence and composed accordingly.
- Drafts. I am happy to meet with you at any stage of the paper writing process, and will review drafts until one week before the paper's due date. I also encourage you to consult with peers and the Writing Center early and often! I will not answer substantial paper questions the day before the paper is due, so plan ahead.
- Paper submission. Please email papers to petrusis@oberlin.edu.
- Sources. You may only use academic secondary sources, and may not use Wikipedia-like sources in your essays. Please consult with me if you have questions about a source.
- Technology. There is no "connecting" in class: no phone calls, texts, email or other internet use, or the like. The first infraction will cost 5 percentage points from your overall grade; the second costs an additional 10 percentage points; and so on. If you want to use a computer in class, please request permission from me.

Other policies, including assignment details, will be discussed in class.

Course schedule.**I. What is a commodity?**

Week of Feb 6: From production to (post) consumption

- Pietra Rivoli, *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy*

Week of Feb 13: Commodification

- Karl Marx, Ch 1.4, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret,” from *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, pp 163-77
- Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodification as Process,” in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things*
- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ch 9, “A Counterpane and a Rose Blanket,” pp 306-39, in *The Age of Homespun*
- Sven Beckert, “Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War,” *American Historical Review* 109:5 (Dec 2004), pp 1405-38

Week of Feb 20: Commodity and value chains

- Jennifer Bair, “Global Commodity Chains: Genealogy and Review,” in Bair, ed., *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*
- Steven Topik, “Historicizing Commodity Chains: Five Hundred Years of the Global Coffee Commodity Chain,” in Bair, ed., *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*
- John Talbot, “Tropical Commodity Chains, Forward Integration Strategies and International Inequality: Coffee, Cocoa and Tea,” *Review of International Political Economy* 9:4 (Nov 2002), pp 701-34
- William Roseberry, “The Rise of Yuppie Coffees and the Reimagination of Class in the United States,” *American Anthropologist* 98:4 (Dec 1996), pp 762-75
- *Optional:* Paul Gootenberg, “Cocaine in Chains: The Rise and Demise of a Global Commodity, 1860-1950,” in Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, Zephyr Frank, eds., *From Silver to Cocaine*; Patrick Radden Keefe, “[Cocaine Incorporated](#),” *New York Times*, June 15, 2012

Week of Feb 20: Commodities and place

- William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*

II. Commoditization as process

Week of Feb 27: Commoditization as process: Production

- Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, pp 19-73 and 166-86
- Moon-Ho Jung, Ch 5, “Redeeming White Supremacy,” pp 146-80, in *Coolies and Cane*
- April Merleaux, “The Political Culture of Sugar Tariffs: Immigration, Race, and Empire,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* (Spring 2012), pp 28-48
- Jim Norris, “[Bargaining for Beets: Migrants and Growers in the Red River Valley](#),” *Minnesota History Quarterly* (Winter 2002-2003), pp 196-209

Week of Mar 6: Commoditization as process: Markets

- Jean-Christophe Agnew, Ch 1, “The threshold of exchange,” pp 17-56, in *Worlds Apart*
- Walter Johnson, Ch 1, “The Chattel Principle,” pp 19-44, in *Soul by Soul*
- Julia Ott, “The Free and Open People’s Market”: Political Ideology and Retail Brokerage at the New York Stock Exchange, 1913-1933,” *Journal of American History* 96:1 (June 2009), pp 44-71
- Paul Stoller, “Spaces, Places, and Fields: The Politics of West African Trading in New York City’s Informal Economy,” *American Anthropologist* 28:4 (Dec 1996), pp 776-88
- Ted Bestor, “Supply-Side Sushi: Commodity, Market, and the Global City,” *American Anthropologist* 103:1 (Mar 2001), pp 76-95
- **Paper 1 (seeing a thing) DUE FRI MAR 8 at 10 AM (email)**

Week of Mar 13: Commoditization as process: Distribution and supply chains

- Nelson Lichtenstein, “The Return of Merchant Capitalism,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* (Mar 2012), pp 8-27
- Marc Levinson, Ch 1, “Introduction,” pp 1-15, and Ch 9, “Vietnam,” pp 170-88, in *The Box*
- Edna Bonacich and Jake Wilson, Ch 7, “Maritime Workers,” pp 159-198, in *Getting the Goods*
- Shane Hamilton, Ch 4, “Trucking Culture and Politics in the Agribusiness Era, 1953-61,” pp 99-134, in *Trucking Country*
- James Fallows, “[Mr. China Comes to America](#),” *The Atlantic* (Dec 2012)

Week of Mar 20: Commoditization as process: Advertising and marketing

- Susan Strasser, Ch 2, “The Name on the Label,” pp 29-57, in *Satisfaction Guaranteed*
- Burleigh B. Gardner and Sidney J. Levy, “The Product and the Brand,” *Harvard Business Review* 33:2 (Mar-Apr 1955)
- SKIM Richard Tedlow, Ch 2, “The Great Cola Wars: Coke vs. Pepsi,” pp 22-112, in *New and Improved*
- “ECONOMICS: The Sun Never Sets On Cacoala,” *Time* (15 May 1950)
- Thomas Frank, Ch 8, “Carnival and Cola: Hip versus Square in the Cola Wars,” pp 168-83, in *The Conquest of Cool*
- Daniel Miller, “Coca-Cola: a black sweet drink from Trinidad,” pp 169-87 in Miller, *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*

Week of Mar 27: SPRING BREAK

Week of Apr 3: Commoditization as process: Retail and display

- William Leach, *Land of Desire*, xiii-xvii, 3-90, 153-63, 191-202, 215-24, 263-92, 298-302, 323-48, 379-90
- Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” <Exposé of 1935>, pp 3-13, plus pictures from pp 34, 35, 36, 49, 50, 59, in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin
- **Paper 2 (historiography of a thing) DUE FRI APR 5 at 10 AM (email)**

Week of Apr 10: Commoditization as process: Consuming

- Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aesthetic Sense as the Sense of Distinction,” pp 205-211, in Juliet Schor and Douglas Holt, *The Consumer Society Reader*
- Lizabeth Cohen, Ch 3, “Encountering Mass Culture,” pp 99-158, in *Making a New Deal*
- Meg Jacobs, “ ‘How About Some Meat?’: The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941-1946,” *Journal of American History* 84:3 (Dec 1997), pp. 910-941
- *Mary and Russel Wright’s Guide to Easier Living*, excerpts
- Shelley Nickles. “More Is Better: Mass Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America,” *American Quarterly* 54, No. 4 (2002), pp 581-622

III. Strange things

Week of Apr 17: Strange things: Bodies as commodities

- Chris Rock, “Good Hair” (Screening date TBD)
- Helen Sheumaker, “ ‘This Lock You See’: Nineteenth Century Hair Work as the Commodified Self,” *Fashion Theory* 1:4 (Nov 1997), pp 421-45
- Materials on the wig (TBD)
- Susannah Walker, “Black is Profitable: The Commodification of the Afro, 1960-1975,” pp 254-77, in Philip Scranton, ed., *Beauty and Business*
- Al Santoli, “The Peddler,” pp 163-83, in *New Americans*

Week of Apr 24: Strange things: Beyond the market

- Margaret Jane Radin, “Contested Commodities,” pp 81-95, in Martha Ertman and Joan Williams, eds., *Rethinking Commodification*
- Viviana Zelizer, Ch 1, “The Marking of Money,” pp 1-30, in *The Social Meaning of Money*
- Daniel Horowitz, Ch 4, “Progressives, Morality, and Reality,” in *The Morality of Spending*
- Gavin Fridell, “Fair Trade Coffee and Commodity Fetishism: The Limits of Market-Driven Social Justice,” *Historical Materialism* 15:4 (Dec 2007), pp 79-104
- Erin Luhmann, “*Just Coffee* signs on with new fair trade certification,” *Madison Commons* (10 and 12 Dec 2012)
- Browse: [Fair Trade Coffee web site](#)

Week of May 1: Strange things: Commodities and empire

- Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia*

Week of May 8: Strange things: Labor as commodity

- Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves*
- Priti Ramamurthy, “Why Is Buying a ‘Madras’ Cotton Shirt a Political Act? A Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis,” *Feminist Studies* 30:3 (Fall 2004), pp 734-69

Final Paper (social life of a thing): DUE MON MAY 13 at 9 AM (email)