Commodities, Nature, & Society

Instructor: Edward D. Melillo
Rice 307
Office Phone: (440) 755-5828
Edward.Melillo@oberlin.edu

Office Hours (Rice 307):
Tuesday: 3:30 – 5:00 p.m.
Wednesday: 1:00 – 2:30 p.m.

Illustration from: Philippe Sylvestre Dufour, *De l’usage du café, du thé, et du chocolat* (1671)

Course Description: Participants in this seminar will explore the environmental and social histories of six commodities: silver, silk, coffee, tobacco, sneakers, and microchips. Each of these commodities represents a complex array of linkages among producers, consumers, and intermediaries over time and space. Readings draw upon the disciplines of history, ecology, and geography to place these commodities in their social, environmental, and spatial contexts. One of our aims is to understand the changing roles of natural systems and the divisions of labor that underlie the long-term processes of “globalization.”

Format: The course meets on Monday evenings from 7:00-9:00 p.m. in King 339. We will all come prepared to engage with each other and discuss the material. Our weekly meetings are far too important to miss, unless you face an urgent, life-threatening situation. Each week, two students will lead our discussions. These individuals will prepare and distribute a list of discussion questions and pertinent themes prior to our Monday meetings.
Readings: We will read the equivalent of a book and three articles per week. The three required texts for the course are:


The remainder of the readings will be available on Blackboard as linked texts or .pdf files.

Assignments:
Weeky writing: During most weeks, students will write two-pages of responses to the readings. These short papers will provide the basis for our discussions.

Discussion leadership: Every week, two students will lead our discussions. Prior to Monday evening, they will prepare a list of questions and themes, which they will distribute to the rest of the group via e-mail or Blackboard.

Final project: Each student will pick a commodity and produce a “commodity chain” of its production, marketing, and consumption. Projects may involve multi-media formats that include text-based and non-text-based approaches. Students will present their results to the seminar during our final session.

Assessment of Your Work:
This is a discussion-based seminar, so class participation and discussion leadership will count for 40% of your final grade. The weekly writing assignments will be worth 30%, while the final project will comprise the remaining 30% of your grade.

Honor Code: The Oberlin community takes its honor code very seriously. You should be familiar with the honor code, which is available for download at: http://www.oberlin.edu/students/links-life/rulesregs.html
It is crucial that you write and sign the honor code on all work you hand in for this class. The Code reads: “I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code on this assignment.”
Schedule

September 3 (no class due to Labor Day): *What’s a Commodity?*
- Read Sydney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*. Come to our first session prepared to discuss Mintz’s approach to commodities.

September 10: **Key Concepts of the Commodity: From Chains to Fetishes**

Silver

September 17: **The Coin Spent ’Round the World**
September 24: Silks by Roads and Silks by Sea

Coffee

October 1: “Good to the Last Drop…”


• Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, “Starbucks and Rootless Cosmopolitanism,” *Gastronomica*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 71-75.

October 8: “The best part of wakin’ up ... is Folgers in your cup.”


October 15: “Come to where the flavor is.”

October 29: Welcome to Global High

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*Sneakers*
November 5: “Just Do It!”

- Thuyen Nguyen, “Nike in Asia: This is Prosperity?” letter, *Wall Street Journal* (June 4, 1997), A19.
- “Nike Goes For The Green: After 14 years, it figures out how to get greenhouse gas out of its sneakers,” *Business Week* (September 25, 2006), available at: [http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_39/b4002108.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_39/b4002108.htm)

**Microchips**

November 12: “Intel Inside”

- Ron Chepesiuk, “Where the Chips Fall: Environmental Health in the Semiconductor Industry,” *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 107, no. 9. (September 1999), pp. A452-A457. Available at: [http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0091-6765%28199909%29107%3A9%3CA452%3AWTCFEH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0091-6765%28199909%29107%3A9%3CA452%3AWTCFEH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C)
November 19: “Globalize This.”


December 3: Perspectives on the Wealth of Nations


December 10: Student Presentations – Final Projects Due