

SEMESTER AT SEA COURSE SYLLABUS

Voyage: Summer 2014

Discipline: Environmental Science

SEMS 3500-105: The Politics of Sustainable Consumption

Division: Upper

Faculty Name: Michael Maniates

Pre-requisites: Two courses in some combination of political science, economics, anthropology, or sociology, *and* rising junior or rising senior status; or permission of instructor.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Consumerism may be the single greatest threat to environmental and social stability on the planet. Billions of people are now being drawn into a consumer culture of increased consumption and a growing focus on acquisition of a wide array of consumer products. Most would agree that the world cannot support seven billion people consuming at the level of the top consumers of the United States or Europe. And many scholars and activists are now concluding that overconsumption in many parts of the world leads to ecological ruin and chronic unhappiness and stress.

But in the end, how much is enough, and for whom? Who decides? And what might the politics of and policies for taming consumerism and overconsumption look like? This seminar explores these questions (and others like them) that animate a politics of ‘sustainable consumption.’ We will interrogate the literature on ‘sustainable consumption,’ explore the conflict occasioned by a range of ‘sustainable consumption’ policies, and assess the power of key actors and interests on all sides of the issue. Through case studies and class activities, we will draw on the experience of many countries on our itinerary. Our aim is to use ‘sustainable consumption’ to enhance our ability to think more systematically about power, politics and policymaking, and to draw on our growing ability to think about politics to analyze the sometimes contradictory theories of power and social change within the sustainable consumption discourse.

Methods of evaluation include a field lab and four in-port reflections (20%), three take-home exams (60%), a brief response paper to a set of core readings (5%), and fifteen in-class assignments that model practical application of course material (15%).

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Understand core components of political science (power, politics, institutions, and policy) as they apply to questions of consumption and consumerism
- Analyze past and present patterns of consumption and consumerism, both nationally and globally

- Weigh competing arguments for why ‘overconsumption’ might be a problem, and what if anything should be done about it
- Draw on the European experience to explore varied responses to the social costs of overconsumption and, more generally, for future policy options.
- Understand the competing theories of social change that characterize the scholarly and activist conversation about ‘sustainable consumption’
- Be able, at semester’s end, to formulate an argument for a particular politics of sustainable consumption of your choosing, drawing from case-study and theoretical material introduced throughout the term

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

AUTHOR: Jackson, Tim
 TITLE: The Earthscan Reader on Sustainable Consumption
 PUBLISHER: Routledge
 ISBN #: 978-1844071647
 DATE/EDITION: 2006

AUTHOR: Princen, et al.
 TITLE: Confronting Consumption
 PUBLISHER: MIT Press
 ISBN #: 978-0262661287
 DATE/EDITION: 2002

AUTHOR: The Worldwatch Institute (Erik Assadourian, editor)
 TITLE: State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability
 PUBLISHER: WW Norton
 ISBN #: 978-0393337266
 DATE/EDITION: 2010

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF COURSE

SOTW = State of the World 2010
 CC = Confronting Consumption
 ERSC = Earthscan Reader on Sustainable Consumption

C1 – C5: Core Concepts and Challenges

What is ‘politics’ and ‘political science’?

The Consumption Juggernaut
The Drivers and Politics of Growth
The Emergence of ‘Sustainable Consumption:’ Contradictions and Convergence

READINGS:

- SOTW: “The Rise and Fall of Consumer Culture” and “Reducing Work Time as a Path to Sustainability”
- CC: Chapters 1 - 5
- ERSC: Chapters 1 – 4

KEY ACTIVITIES:

- Answer the ‘why care’ question about consumption and consumerism.
- Compare the links between work and ‘consumption’ in Europe and the United States to develop notions of ‘power,’ ‘politics,’ ‘policy,’ and ‘institutions’
- Evaluate and assess notions of growth, and the politics of growth in modern industrial societies
- Identify and assess core concepts around the politics of consumption: distancing, individualization, and commodification
- Review the recent history of ‘sustainable consumption’ as a scholarly and policy endeavor
- Brief case study of Spain: The rise of ‘collaborative consumption’ in the face of austerity
- Ecological Footprint exercise on ship computer network
- Early writing assignment (diagnostic, worth 5% of grade): A critical response to “The Rise and Fall of Consumer Culture”

C6 – C8: Resisting Consumption: Individual Acts of Simplicity ← → Overarching Policy?

READINGS:

- ERSC: Part II
- CC: Chapter Nine
- SOTW: “Adapting Institutions for Life in a Full World,” “Editing Out Unsustainable Behavior,” and “Inspiring People to See that Less is More”

KEY ACTIVITIES:

- Mini-case of “Transition Towns” Movement in the United Kingdom
- Analysis of ‘structure’ vs. ‘agency’ within sustainable consumption
- Interrogation of ‘voluntary simplicity’ as a political act
- Focus on the politics and policies of ‘choice editing’ for sustainable consumption

C9 – C10: Catch up and Review

First Exam: C10

C11 – C17: Contrasting Perspectives on Politics and Policies for Sustainable Consumption

The power of “Cultural Pioneers”

Elite efforts to challenge consumption

The politics of sustainable consumption in Europe and the United States

Convergence and divergence around theories of social change and human nature

READINGS:

- SOTW: At least one reading from each of the six sections of the book
- CC: At least two of the case studies from the final section of the book
- ERSC: Chapter 14 (a case study of the Netherlands) and then at least one chapter from 15 - 19

KEY ACTIVITIES:

- Identify, contrast, and analyze competing (and often contradictory) theories of institutionalization and social change in the sustainable development literature
- Move beyond simple ideas like ‘bottom up vs. top down change’ to articulate and defend a practical politics of sustainable consumption within democratic societies
- Mini-case studies of sustainable consumption in Norway and Sweden
- Prepare for Exam # 2

C18 – C19: Catch up and Review

Second Exam: C19

C20 – C23: Thinking politically, institutionally, and creatively about ‘confronting consumption’

READINGS:

- “We Live Through Institutions,” from Robert Bellah et al. *The Good Society* (pdf to be provided by instructor)
- Review and analysis of the Worldwatch Institute’s “Transforming Consumer Culture” blog (available on the ship’s computer system)
- SOTW: Revisit “The Rise and Fall of Consumer Culture”
- CC: “Conclusion: To Confront Consumption”
- ERSC: Part Four: “Reframing Sustainable Consumption”

KEY ACTIVITIES:

- Return to opening themes of the course, but with greater sophistication: How does ‘sustainable consumption’ help us think more critically and creatively about power, politics, and policy in industrial democracies; and how does our focus on power, politics, and policy this semester help us understand the promise and contradictions of the sustainable consumption discourse?
- Looking to our return to the United States: What can we say about the prospects for sustainable consumption, and how do we evaluate the claims about the political imagination of Americans offered by Robert Bellah?
- Review for final synthesis take-home exam

C24: Final Exam

Good luck, rock on, stay in touch, and make a difference

FIELD WORK

Field lab attendance is mandatory for all students enrolled in this course. Please do not book individual travel plans or a Semester at Sea sponsored trip on the day of our field lab.

Field work for this course falls into two categories. The first is a day-long field lab focusing on one aspect of our course. We will draw from this field lab in later class sessions, and material from the lab will appear on our in-class exams and problem sets. You will also write an 800 word reflection on this experience.

The second category of field work is a series of four port reflections of 800 words each that report on your observations of some combination of individual behavior and structural element that influence levels of overall consumption in four cities on our itinerary. More detail on these reflections will be provided on the first day of class.

***FIELD LAB** (At least 20 percent of the contact hours for each course, to be led by the instructor.)*

- We will spend much of the day on 10/13 of July, our first/last day in Dublin, learning about the politics of Ireland’s ban on plastic shopping bags and, more generally, Dublin’s focus on ‘reduce’ and ‘reuse’ rather than ‘recycling.’ We will focus in particular on the variety of ‘choice edits’ (see associated reading, above) in place in Dublin that systematically steer citizens away from particular forms of consumption.
- Alternatively, we will spend much of the day on either 6 or 9 of August (our first and last day in Helsinki) speaking with representatives of the city’s ‘voluntary simplicity’ community and investigating the intersection of personal choice/responsibility with a number of ‘top down, elite driven’ practices in the city that encourage levels of consumption significantly lower than the all-European average. We will aim to understand

the politics of personal choice *and* citizen action in Helsinki, as they intersect with consumption, and seek to draw conclusions about the applicability to the U.S. experience.

FIELD ASSIGNMENTS

Twenty percent of your final course grade flows from field-based work. You will document this work via five 800-word essays that you will submit periodically throughout the semester. One essay will be a response piece to the issues raised in our field lab. The remaining four essays will report on your investigation and reflections in four ports. More detail on these essays will be provided on the first day of class.

METHODS OF EVALUATION / GRADING RUBRIC

You will be evaluated on the quality and comprehensiveness of your five field reports of 800 words each (20%), your performance on three ‘take home’ essay exams (60%), a brief response paper to a set of core readings early in the semester (5%), and fifteen in-class assignments that model practical application of course material (15%). You will be allowed to rewrite one of your field reports for a higher grade. Student collaboration on the preparation of your take-home exams is encouraged, but all writing must be your own.

RESERVE LIBRARY LIST

None at this time

ELECTRONIC COURSE MATERIALS

As noted above. The instructor will provide the necessary PDFs, if this is acceptable to UVA library staff.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

None

HONOR CODE

Semester at Sea students enroll in an academic program administered by the University of Virginia, and thus bind themselves to the University’s honor code. The code prohibits all acts of lying, cheating, and stealing. Please consult the Voyager’s Handbook for further explanation of what constitutes an honor offense.

Each written assignment for this course must be pledged by the student as follows: “On my honor

as a student, I pledge that I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment.” The pledge must be signed, or, in the case of an electronic file, signed “[signed].”

