Chapman University

Course Syllabus

**ECON/ENG/PHIL 357 *Topics in Humanomics: Consumerism and Its Discontents***

Interterm 2022 M,T,W,R 1-3:50 WH 220

Professor Erik Kimbrough Professor Virginia Postrel

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Office Hours: We will have joint office hours TBD at the Smith Institute (Free Coffee!) We are also available by appointment (just give us a 24-hour notice)

Prerequisites: None Restrictions: Sophomore Standing or Faculty Consent Required

Course Description:

The consumer society that has blossomed since the Industrial Revolution is the wealthiest, healthiest and freest society ever known. Yet with this wealth and the freedom to choose, we see people opting to expend incredible resources on “conspicuous consumption,” as they attempt to keep up with the Joneses (and Kardashians). This course will explore the logic of consumption and ask whether it is possible to mount an ethical defense of consumption and the life of the “leisure class.” What do people want? What do they need? Where do those wants and needs come from? And what should they want? Who gets to decide?

Humanomics classes (like this one) adopt a distinctively interdisciplinary approach. Throughout the term, we will address these questions through the lenses of economics, philosophy, and art (especially literature and cinema). We will not just ask what these disciplines have to say about our topic independently of one another; we will also ask how these disciplines interact, enrich each other, and have unique ways of capturing different dimensions of reality. The overarching idea is that there are many ways of expressing important ideas and that focusing on any one form of expression (social scientific, philosophical, artistic) in isolation is bound to leave important aspects of those ideas unstated, or incompletely expressed. Moreover, by working with media situated in a variety of historical contexts, we will necessarily ask why a set of ideas have been expressed in different ways in different times and places, and how this form of expression affects what’s being said.

**Course Learning Outcomes:**Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

● Challenge and deconstruct the perceived tensions between economics and the humanities.

● Ask cogent, thought-provoking questions based upon critical reading of texts across a range of artistic, philosophical, and historical genres—film, fiction and non-fiction.

● Explain theories of the consumer society and consumer behavior, including their assumptions and their implications.

● Examine how our consumption shapes our identity, our understanding of the world and our relation to social structures.

● Explain the relation of status competition to historical, political and social context: early 20th Century America, contemporary society.

● Explain methods used to measure consumption and consumer behavior (e.g. surveys, experiments, ethnographies).

● Explore the relationship between consumer society, status, economic institutions and economic decision-making.

● Examine and appreciate formal and aesthetic characteristics of literature (e.g. characterization, narrative structure, prose style, generic characteristics).

● Show how the formal qualities of artistic works dramatize status competition in the consumer society.

● Show how artistic works represent the moral and ethical successes/failures of people and institutions in their historical context.

● Articulate how texts across the disciplines are co-constitutive of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics.

● Demonstrate thoughtful rhetorical choices in creative and expository prose.

**Program or General Education Outcomes:**Upon completion of the course, students will have:

● Composed critical and creative works motivated by theories of moral development.

● Explored and explained processes by which humans develop social and/or historical perspectives.

● Explored and explained values and ethical perspectives in light of theories of moral development.

● Artistic Inquiry Learning Outcome: Students compose critical or creative works that embody or analyze conceptually an artistic form at a baccalaureate / pre-professional level.

● Social Inquiry Learning Outcome: Students identify, frame and analyze social and/or historical structures and institutions in the world today.

● Values/Ethics Inquiry Learning Outcome: Students articulate how values and ethics inform human understanding, structures, institutions, and behavior.

Required Books:

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad.* Anchor Books, 2011.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby.* Scribner, 1925/2004.

Postrel, Virginia. *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture & Consciousness.*  HarperPerennial, 2003.

Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class.* Oxford University Press, 1899/2009.

Excerpts, Journal Articles, Short Stories:

Ball, Sheryl, Catherine Eckel, Philip J. Grossman, and William Zame. “Status in Markets.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 116, 1 (February 2001): 161-188.

De Botton, Alain. “Definitions” and “Lovelessness.” *Status Anxiety.* Vintage Books, 2005: vii-10.

Demick, Barbara. *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea.* Spiegel & Grau, 2009.

Freund, Charles Paul. “In Praise of Vulgarity: How Commercial Culture Liberates Islam—and the West.” 2 March 2001. <http://reason.com/archives/2002/03/01/in-praise-of-vulgarity>.

Hamblin, James. “Buy Experiences, Not Things.” *The Atlantic Monthly* (Oct. 2014). <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/10/buy-experiences/381132/>.

Karelis, Charles. “A New Way to Rationalize the Conduct that Prolongs and Worsens Poverty.”

*The Persistence of Poverty: Why the Economics of the Well-off Can’t Help the Poor.* Yale University Press, 2007: 61 – 92.

Lucas, J.R. “Against Equality.” *Philosophy 40,* 154(Oct. 1965): 296-307.

Marcuse, Herbert. “The New Forms of Control.” *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society. 2nd Edition.* Beacon Press, 1964/1991: 1-18.

Moav, Omer, and Zvika Neeman. “Status and Poverty.” *Journal of the European Economic*

*Association,* 8, 2/3 (April-May 2010): 413-420.

Penny, Daniel. “The Instagrammable Charm of the Bourgeoisie.” *The Boston Review*, (Nov. 2017).

Postrel, Virginia. *The Power of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion.* Simon & Schuster, 2013.  *Icons:* Smoking, The Golden State, Shanghai, Suntan.

Radovcic, Davorka, Ankica Oros Srsen, Jakov Radovcic, and David W. Frayer. “Evidence for Neandertal Jewelry: Modified White-Tailed Eagle Claws at Krapina.” *Plos One* (11 March 2015): 1-14.

Ridley, Matt. “The Peacock’s Tale.” *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature.* Harper Perennial, 2003: 129-170.

Strauss, Elissa. “Experiences Over Stuff Is a Tired – and Sexist – Idea.” *Slate* (June 2016).

Van de Ven, Niels, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Rik Pieters. “Leveling Up and Leveling Down: The Experience of Benign and Malicious Envy.” *Emotion* 9, 3 (2009): 419-429.

Viorst, Judith. *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.* Athenaeum Books for Young Readers, 1972.

Links to these and a few relevant podcast interviews will be made available on the class site.

Instructional Methods:

This course includes a combination of roundtable discussions, writing workshops, question development, economic experiments, and the demonstration of original thinking in expository and creative writing.

Evaluation

Because of the interactive nature of the class, attendance is an essential component. Excessive tardies constitute absences; three absences may result in failure (Undergraduate Catalog, “Academic Policies and Procedures.”) Please keep this in mind. Missed in-class work cannot be made up.

1. Participation in Class Discussion [10%]

Class discussion provides an opportunity for students to explore questions about

consumerism. Through this shared inquiry, students gain experience

reading for meaning and communicating complex ideas; thinking reflectively about an

interpretive problem; and supporting and testing thoughts through dialogue with

peers. Class discussion fosters the flexibility of mind to consider problems from

multiple perspectives and the ability to analyze ideas critically. Students must enter the

discussion with specific questions generated by the texts as well as a desire to

probe and reevaluate ideas. It is essential that students bring texts and questions to

each class session.

2.Written Questions [10%]

Shared inquiry is a process for exploring the central ideas of the course. This means

students must read for meaning, identifying possible interpretative problems they

would like to address in discussion. For each class period with an assignment, students

will word process in advance two questions to be handed in before class starts. Asking

a good question is harder than providing a good answer. The student’s task is to delve

into a claim or idea they find puzzling, exploring what has unsettled them.

3. Writer’s and Presenter’s Workshop [20%]

The writer's workshop is based on the idea that students learn to write when they write often; in this case, focusing their attention on ideas from the readings and discussions immediately preceding the workshop. Students will encounter a variety of writing assignments for workshop. The goal is to produce papers of approximately 250 words and submit a polished paper at the end of the hour. The presenter's workshop will exercise your public speaking skills as you make the case on one side (or the other) of an important debate or summarize the main argument of one of your written assignments.

4. Papers – Expository and Creative [45% = 3 x 15% each]

In addition to the writer’s workshop papers, students will complete three major papers in the course. A combination of expository and creative writing, these papers (approximately 1000 words) will provide opportunities for students to explore ideas and use texts to add to the ongoing discourse on consumerism. Provide two printed copies.

5. Oral Final Examination [15%]

Students will consider the course objectives for *Consumerism and Its Discontents* and respond to questions posed by the professors in an oral examination.

University Policies:

Academic Integrity

“Chapman University is a community of scholars that emphasizes the mutual responsibility of all members to seek knowledge honestly and in good faith. Students are responsible for doing their own work and academic dishonesty of any kind will be subject to sanction by the instructor/administrator and referral to the university Academic Integrity Committee, which may impose additional sanctions including expulsion. Please see the full description of Chapman University’s policy on Academic Integrity at [www.chapman.edu/academics/academicintegrity/index.aspx](http://www.chapman.edu/academics/academicintegrity/index.aspx).”

Students with Disabilities

“In compliance with ADA guidelines, students who have any condition, either permanent or temporary, that might affect their ability to perform in this class are encouraged to contact the Disability Services Office. If you will need to utilize your approved accommodations in this class, please follow the proper notification procedure for informing your professor(s). This notification process must occur more than a week before any accommodation can be utilized. Please contact Disability Services at (714) 516–4520 or visit [www.chapman.edu/students/student-health-services/disability-services](http://www.chapman.edu/students/student-health-services/disability-services) if you have questions regarding this procedure or for information or to make an appointment to discuss and/or request potential accommodations based on documentation of your disability. Once formal approval of your need for an accommodation has been granted, you are encouraged to talk with your professor(s) about your accommodation options. The granting of any accommodation will not be retroactive and cannot jeopardize the academic standards or integrity of the course.”

Equity and Diversity Policy

“Chapman University is committed to ensuring equality and valuing diversity. Students and professors are reminded to show respect at all times as outlined in Chapman’s Harassment and Discrimination Policy. Please see the full description of this policy at [www.chapman.edu/faculty-staff/human-resources/eoo.aspx](http://www.chapman.edu/faculty-staff/human-resources/eoo.aspx). Any violations of this policy should be discussed with the professor, the dean of students and/or otherwise reported in accordance with this policy.”

Syllabus prepared by: Erik Kimbrough & Virginia Postrel, Spring 2021

**Course Schedule (subject to change, assignments updated as we go):**

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| **Date** | **Readings** | **Assignment** |
| 3-Jan | Veblen, Ch. 1-3, Consumer Theory Slides | [Christmas List](https://www.dropbox.com/s/h5t25jasq4ml5be/ChristmasList.docx?dl=0) |
| 4-Jan | Veblen, Ch. 4-5, Fitzgerald, Ch. 1-3 | [Writer's Workshop 1](https://www.dropbox.com/s/bonbxiotswof7f1/WritersWorkshop_1.docx?dl=0) |
| 5-Jan | Veblen, Ch. 6-7, Fitzgerald, Ch. 4-5 | [Debate Club 1](https://www.dropbox.com/s/klthr2dl658jpyc/Debate%20Club.docx?dl=0) |
| 6-Jan | Veblen, Ch. 8-10, Fitzgerald, Ch. 6-7 | [Writer's Workshop 2](https://www.dropbox.com/s/phe7fyn6ayuzx30/WritersWorkshop_2.docx?dl=0) |
| 10-Jan | Veblen, Ch. 11-12, Fitzgerald, Ch. 8-9 | Draft of Paper 1 Due |
| 11-Jan | Veblen, Ch. 13-14, Karelis, Moav and Neeman, Postrel | **Paper 1 Due** |
| 12-Jan | Egan, Ch. 1-3, Marcuse, Kylie Jenner's Instagram | Present Data Graphic |
| 13-Jan | Egan, Ch. 4-6, Ball et al., De Botton | [Writer's Workshop 3](https://www.dropbox.com/s/c7t6i62jl1rtche/WritersWorkshop_3.docx?dl=0) |
| 18-Jan | Egan, Ch. 7-9, Van de Ven et al., Mears | [Paper 2 Prompt](https://www.dropbox.com/s/eet1uurwg3dso6c/PaperPrompt_2.docx?dl=0) |
| 19-Jan | Egan, Ch. 10-13, Strauss, Hamblin, Currid-Halkett | [Writer's Workshop 4](https://www.dropbox.com/s/ydepgfm7tbdnpg6/WritersWorkshop_4.docx?dl=0) |
| 20-Jan | Postrel, Preface and Ch. 1-2, Radovcic et al., Ridley | **Paper 2 Due** |
| 24-Jan | Postrel, Ch. 3-4, Scott, Demick, Yang | [Paper 3 Prompt](https://www.dropbox.com/s/s2am68nms8u80u7/PaperPrompt_3.docx?dl=0) |
| 25-Jan | Postrel, Ch. 5-6, Postrel, Penny | [Writer's Workshop 5](https://www.dropbox.com/s/f7sdh6rkgimuofn/WritersWorkshop_5.docx?dl=0) |
| 26-Jan | Lucas 1, Lucas 2, Freund, Grant | **Paper 3 Due** |