



Course and Examination Fact Sheet: Spring Semester 2025

8,622: Gesellschaft/Society: Consumers in the Modern World

ECTS credits: 3

Overview examination/s

(binding regulations see below)

decentral - Written work, Digital, Individual work individual grade (20%)

Examination time: Term time

decentral - Written work, Digital, Individual work individual grade (80%)

Examination time: Term time

Attached courses

Timetable -- Language -- Lecturer

[8,622,1.00 Gesellschaft/Society: Consumers in the Modern World](#) -- English -- [Trentmann Frank](#)

Course information

Course prerequisites

None.

Learning objectives

Students

- know the history of consumers from early modern Europe to contemporary Asia and key moments of transformation,
- know classic texts from sociology, anthropology and economics on consumers as well as historical texts,
- know the role of consumers as social and political actors,
- are able to reflect on contemporary debates about consumers as "responsible" or "irresponsible" actors from a historical perspective, and look ahead to the future place of consumers with regard to well-being and sustainability.

Course content

Consumers are integral to the modern world. We are all "consumers" now. What this means, however, and how we should understand consumption has been the subject of long, explosive debate. Consumption straddles individual desire and civic responsibility, needs and wants, private and public life. Special attention will be paid to debates about consumers as "responsible" or "irresponsible" actors.

In this seminar we will follow consumers from early modern Europe to contemporary Asia to explore key moments of transformation. Seminar readings combine classic texts from sociology, anthropology and economics with historical texts on consumers as social and political actors.

Students will gain familiarity with classic texts and theories. They will acquire critical, historically informed analytical thought. They will gain knowledge about the role of consumers as social and political actors.

The seminar will begin with classic theories of consumption. It will then move chronologically and thematically through major developments and debates, including the luxury debates; consumer boycotts; shopping and gender identities; class and status; the consumer as citizen; Americanisation and Asian consumer cultures. Consuming needs time as well as money. We will therefore also consider economic approaches to the allocation of time and debate the idea of a "harried society". The seminar will conclude with a discussion about how contemporary debates about consumers as "responsible" or "irresponsible" actors is grounded in history, and look ahead to the future place of consumers with regard to well-being and sustainability.



Course structure and indications of the learning and teaching design

Blockseminar. Seminar discussion; short lectures; advice on essay topics, research strategy and writing.

Contextual Studies are considered part of **Contact Learning**; thus, taking part properly implies **regular attendance**. It is the students' own responsibility to ensure that there is **no timetable clash** between the courses they have chosen. A detailed course outline and all relevant documents will be made available on **StudyNet**. Only the current timetable as published on **Courses** does apply.

Course literature

REQUIRED READING: (Skript/Course Reader):

- Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry", selection from Juliet Schor and Douglas Holt, eds., The Consumer Society Reader, pp. 3-19.
- Berg, Maxine. "In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century" Past and Present 182, no. 1 (2004): 85-142.
- Becker, Gary S. "A Theory of the Allocation of Time", *Economic Journal*, vol. 75, No. 299 (Sep., 1965), 493-517.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, Distinction (engl: London: Routledge, 1984), ch. 5 (pp. 260-78 only)
- Cohen, Elizabeth, A Consumer's Republic (Knopf: 2003), ch. 3.
- Douglas, Mary and Baron Isherwood, The World of Goods, selection from Martyn J. Lee, ed., The Consumer Society Reader, pp. 73-83
- Garon, Sheldon, 'Japan's Post-war 'Consumer Revolution,' or Striking a 'Balance' between Consumption and Saving', in John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (eds), Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006). Chapter 7.
- Gerth, Karl. As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers Are Transforming Everything. New York, 2010, ch. 1.
- de Grazia, Victoria. Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through 20th-Century Europe. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005, ch. 8.
- Hume, David, "On Luxury", in: Hume, Essays. NDER, S. B. (1970) The Harried Leisure Class, New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 1-36.
- Prestholdt Jeremy. "On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism." American Historical Review 109, no. 3 (2004): 755-81.
- Rappaport, Erika, Shopping for Pleasure, ch. 5.
- Scarpellini, Emanuela. "Shopping American Style: The Arrival of the Supermarket in Postwar Italy." Enterprise & Society 5, no. 4 (2004): 625-68.
- Veblen, Thorstein, Conspicuous Consumption, selection from Martyn J. Lee, ed., The Consumer Society Reader, pp. 31-47.
- Watson, James L. "China's Big Mac Attack." *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2000): 120-134.

BACKGROUND READING:

Trentmann, Frank, Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First (London: Allen Lane/Penguin 2016; New York: HarperCollins). Deutsch: Herrschaft der Dinge: Die Geschichte des Konsums, vom 15. Jh. bis Heute (Muenchen: DVA 2017)

Additional course information

Frank Trentmann, historian, PhD Harvard. Research and publications on: consumption, globalisation, political culture and civil society. Director of the interdisciplinary research programme "Cultures of Consumption". Moore Fellow, Caltech. Humboldt-Research Prize. Professor at Birkbeck College, University of London.

Examination information

Examination sub part/s

1. Examination sub part (1/2)

Examination modalities

Examination type Written work



Responsible for organisation	decentral
Examination form	Written work
Examination mode	Digital
Time of examination	Term time
Examination execution	Asynchronous
Examination location	Off Campus
Grading type	Individual work individual grade
Weighting	20%
Duration	--

Examination languages

Question language: English

Answer language: English

Remark

Thesepapier -- research plan, max 2 pages.

Examination-aid rule

Free aids provision

Basically, students are free to choose aids. Any restrictions are defined by the faculty members in charge of the examination under supplementary aids.

Supplementary aids

--

2. Examination sub part (2/2)

Examination modalities

Examination type	Written work
Responsible for organisation	decentral
Examination form	Written work
Examination mode	Digital
Time of examination	Term time
Examination execution	Asynchronous
Examination location	Off Campus
Grading type	Individual work individual grade
Weighting	80%
Duration	--

Examination languages

Question language: English

Answer language: English

Remark

Seminar paper about 24'000 characters

Examination-aid rule

Free aids provision

Basically, students are free to choose aids. Any restrictions are defined by the faculty members in charge of the examination under supplementary aids.

Supplementary aids

--



Examination content

1. **Seminar paper** counts for 80% (about 24'000 characters including spaces) discussing one of the topics and debates of the Blockseminar OR of a topic related to the course, drawing on additional reading and research. The paper (deadline Monday, 23 May 2025, 17:00) should focus on one of the seminar topics/debates and develop this further with the selective use of additional research and sources.
2. Students will also submit a short **Thesepapier** (research plan) by 11 April 2025, which counts for 20% - no more than 2 pages. The Thesepapier will outline the research question, its significance in relation to existing literature, identify potential sources and suggest method and draft structure. The professor will give students advice and feedback on the memo. The essay can be an in-depth exploration of a particular case and/or draw on a country/region in addition to those discussed in the seminar core reading.

Examination relevant literature

In addition to making use of the required reading for seminar discussions (available in the Skript/Course Reader), students are expected to base their paper on research of selected, additional literature. A further reading list will be provided via StudyNet by the beginning of the course.

BACKGROUND READING:

Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin 2016; New York: HarperCollins). Deutsch: *Herrschaft der Dinge: Die Welt des Konsums vom 15. Jh. bis Heute* (Munich: DVA 2017)

Please note

Please note that only this fact sheet and the examination schedule published at the time of bidding are binding and takes precedence over other information, such as information on StudyNet (Canvas), on lecturers' websites and information in lectures etc.

Any references and links to third-party content within the fact sheet are only of a supplementary, informative nature and lie outside the area of responsibility of the University of St.Gallen.

Documents and materials are only relevant for central examinations if they are available by the end of the lecture period (CW21) at the latest. In the case of centrally organised mid-term examinations, the documents and materials up to CW 13 (Monday, 25 March 2025) are relevant for testing.

Binding nature of the fact sheets:

- Course information as well as examination date (organised centrally/decentrally) and form of examination: from bidding start in CW 04 (Thursday, 23 January 2025);
- Examination information (supplementary aids, examination contents, examination literature) for decentralised examinations: in CW 12 (Monday, 17 March 2025);
- Examination information (supplementary aids, examination contents, examination literature) for centrally organised mid-term examinations: in CW 14 (Monday, 31 March 2025);
- Examination information (regulations on aids, examination contents, examination literature) for centrally organised examinations: two weeks before ending with de-registration period in CW 15 (Monday, 07 April 2025).