Sociology 189N: Ethical Consumption in the Global Age  
Pomona College  
Spring 2012  

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Course Description

This seminar focuses on the values, identities, and practices that compose ethical consumption today, and the social and economic conditions that gave rise to this phenomenon. We begin by considering the key debates that surround ethical consumption, and then zoom out to construct a theoretical framework of consumption and consumerism that will provide a foundation for interrogating the practice. We will consider historical moral critiques of labor and production under capitalism, and manifestations of consumer activism throughout the modern era, and ask whether today’s ethical consumption is different from previous forms. To contextualize today’s various intersections of consumption and ethics, we will study the three primary movements that have coalesced to call it into being: labor rights activists, environmentalists, and those who critique the political-economy of global trade. We will examine how businesses have responded to critiques of their practices, the role of the state and civil society in regulating and certifying business practices, and the efficacy of a consumer-driven model of social, economic, and environmental change.

Required Books


### Participation & Assignments

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There is much to discuss and debate about contemporary practices of ethical consumption, therefore **class participation** is a major component of your grade. You are expected to come to class having read assigned readings thoroughly, having reflected on them, and ready to have a conversation about them.

Each student is responsible for **facilitating discussion** once during the semester. You will sign up for a date, and must come prepared to lead the class in conversation about the key ideas presented in the readings, questions raised by them, as well as points of debate inspired by them. In addition you must submit printed talking points on your assigned day.

You are responsible for keeping a journal and for bringing it to class. Use your **journal entries** to reflect in two to three paragraphs on what you have read for each class session. You might consider any questions raised, points of debate, the historical context of the topics addressed, how you as an individual and as a member of American society relate to the issues covered, and any compelling questions that we might discuss as a class. Whether hand-written or typed, you should bring your journal to every class session to aide you in discussion. Throughout the semester I will check at random that you have brought your journal to class, and will collect them to grade and respond to them three times, on Thursday, February 16, Thursday, March 22, and Thursday, April 26.

Thursday, March 8, you will submit an eight to ten page **autoethnographic essay** about your practices as a consumer. Your essay should discuss to what degree you do or do not gravitate toward ethical products and why (or why not), how you feel about your consumption practices, and relying on course readings, a critical reflection of your personal connection to laborers around the world, environmental issues, and the global economy. A more detailed prompt will follow.
Throughout the semester you will develop a research project on either a certification model or a product. This project will be developed and graded in stages. First, you will submit a one page written proposal on which I will offer feedback, due Tuesday, February 14. Later in the semester, during weeks 10 and 11, you will meet with me for a one-on-one consultation on the development of your research. The project will culminate in a fifteen page written report, and a presentation to the class during the regularly scheduled final examination period. Seniors must submit reports and deliver presentations on the last day of class. More detailed guidelines will follow.

Written work must be typed, double spaced, in 12 point font, and stapled (or otherwise fastened) when submitted. You are required to use ASA style citations in this course. Assignments must be submitted in person on the day that they are due. Extensions will only be considered after in-person requests, at least one week in advance of the assigned due date. Late work will not be accepted.

Schedule of Readings

Introduction

Week 1: Introducing Ethical Consumption

Tuesday, January 17: Introduction to Course

Thursday, January 19: Introduction to Ethical Consumption


Theoretical Framework

Week 2: Perspectives on Consumption and Consumerism

Tuesday, January 24

Thursday, January 26
Student Facilitation 1

Week 3: The Social Function of Goods

Tuesday, January 31

Thursday, February 2
Student Facilitation 2
critique of the judgement of taste. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Consumption and Ethics, Then and Now

Week 4: A History of Consumer Boycotts and Activism

Tuesday, February 7


Thursday, February 9

Student Facilitation 3


Week 5: Today’s Ethical Consumer

Tuesday, February 14

Submit Project Proposal

Special guest: Lauren Alfrey


Thursday, February 16

Submit Journal


A Three Pronged Approach: Labor, Environment, and Economy

Week 6: Labor Critiques of Global Capitalism

Tuesday, February 21


Thursday, February 23

Student Facilitation 4

Week 7: Environmental Critiques of Capitalism

Tuesday, February 28: Capitalism, Consumption, and the Environment

_The Story of Stuff_, a film by Annie Leonard. (20 minutes)

Thursday, March 1

**Student Facilitation 5**

Week 8: Political-Economy Critiques of Global Capitalism

Tuesday, March 6

Thursday, March 8
*Submit Autoethnographic Essay*

Week 9: Spring Break 😊

Critical Culmination and the Synergistic Response of Civil Society and Corporations

Week 10: The Anti-Globalization Movement

Tuesday, March 20: Critiques of Globalization

Thursday, March, 22: Critical Responses to Globalization

**Student Facilitation 6, Submit Journal**

Week 11: Corporate Social Responsibility & Product Certification

Tuesday, March 27: Self-Regulation in the Corporate World: (91 pages)
Find, print, and read a corporate social responsibility report online from a large corporation: i.e., Starbucks, Earthbound Farm Organic, American Apparel, Walmart, Target, Apple, Nike, etc.


Thursday March, 29: External Regulation & Partnership

**Student Facilitation**

Find, print, and read the policy of a major certifications: i.e., Fair Trade USA, Fairtrade International, Organic, Rainforest Alliance, Bird Friendly, Forest Stewardship Council, CarbonNeutral, Sustainable Certification, etc.


Debating the Merits of Ethical Consumption

Week 12: The Political Power of Ethical Consumption

Tuesday, April 3: Consumption as 21st Century Politics

Thursday, April 5: Contextualizing the Politics of Ethical Consumption

Student Facilitation 8

Week 13: The Contradictions, Anxieties, and Pitfalls of Ethical Consumption

Tuesday, April 10: Critiquing the Structure & Ideology of Ethical Consumption

Thursday, April 12: Critiquing the Practice of Ethical Consumption

**Student Facilitation 9**


**Beyond Ethical Consumption**

Week 14: Anti-Consumerism & Alternative Consumption

Tuesday April 17: Theorizing Anti-Consumerism


Thursday, April 19: Alternatives on the Ground

**Student Facilitation 10**


**Week 15: Producer Critiques of Ethical Trade & Radical Alternatives**

**Tuesday, April 24: Producers Talk Back**


**Merling Preza on “Fair Trade for All.”**


Thursday, April 26: Radical Alternatives to Trade-Based Development
Submit Journal
Special guest: Stefanie Torlai Stauffer.

Course Conclusion

Week 16: Course Conclusion

Tuesday, May 1: Senior Presentations & Closing Discussion
Seniors submit research report.

Week 17: Final Examinations

Tuesday, May 8: Final presentations commence at 2:00 PM.
Submit research report.