If you know someone who stood in line recently to purchase the latest generation of the Apple iPhone, then you’re aware of how deeply consumer culture permeates our lives. Our relationships to brands have increasingly become the cultural context for everyday living, individual identity, and even our emotional attachments to one another. A humorous recent television commercial demonstrates the deep allegiances among brand partisans when a peaceful wedding ceremony is turned into a pitched battle between Apple and Samsung enthusiasts. Oh, yes – and the commercial was made by Microsoft to promote its Nokia Windows phone. The battle lines are drawn, and we’re drawn to them.

By tracing the history of consumer culture in the United States, particularly since 1900, we will explore this terrain where politics, economics, and culture intersect. We will focus largely on the tension between Americans’ identities as citizens and consumers. The goal of this course is to understand how and why American society became committed to mass consumption and, for better or worse, its far-reaching consequences.