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 relationship to brands has increasingly become the cultural context for everyday living, individual identity, and even our emotional attachments to the people in our lives and the places in which we live. By tracing the history of consumer culture in the United States 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. By focusing on issues related to the development of consumer culture, the readings, assignments, and classroom activities for this course are intended to help you develop competence in critical thinking about the history of American culture and society, as demonstrated through exams and short essays, and advanced skill in the writing of reasoned arguments, as demonstrated in formal papers.