

Honors 240: Reading the Past: Commodities and the Construction of the Atlantic World
Class 10:30 am - 11:45 am MW Aquia Building 219

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Robinson B 345

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Office hours: Wednesdays 1 pm – 3 pm

Course description:

This course examines the role of Atlantic commodities such as chocolate, sugar, tobacco, bananas, and cocaine in constructing the modern world system, beginning in the sixteenth century. We will examine how these commodities were exported and imported, how they affected populations, and how ideas about these goods and their effects developed through time and over space. Commodity flows are integral to world politics, economics, and historical events. The desire for commodities justified colonialism, created significant trade imbalances, and led to the exploitation of land and labor in many parts of the world.

Books (available in the bookstore):

Books:

1. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*
2. Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures.*
3. Soluri, *Banana Cultures*
4. Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine*

In addition to these books, there are readings available online. See the schedule below for information.

Assignments and grading:

1) Research assignment (20%). Choose one commodity that has had a significant impact on world history. Create a map of its route and give a 5-minute presentation explaining the map and the impact of your commodity on world history. You will record these presentations in the Gateway library One Button Studio and email them to me. More information on that below in week 15.

Then choose one of the following tasks:

- a. Create an annotated bibliography of 5 books about this commodity. The annotated bibliography should use Robbins' framework to discuss the books about the commodity. We read Robbins in week 1 and we will discuss this assignment more. You will meet in the library for research help in week 5. Each annotation should be at least 500 words.
- b.. Discuss (in 750-1,000 words) whether this commodity has been fetishized or not (using and citing Marx's ideas about commodity fetishism). We read Marx in Week 2.

2) Two papers, 750-1,000 words (20% each). The due dates are noted on the syllabus (February 22 and April 5). You will receive prompts for the papers.

- 3) **Five quizzes (20% total).** These will be simple quizzes (usually True/False) based on the class readings. The quizzes do not require any study beyond reading the assignments and paying attention in class.
- 4) **Class participation (20%).** Participation will be measured by involvement in class discussions, both group discussions and larger class discussions. You must attend class regularly in order to participate. Please complete the readings by Monday of each week and arrive in class ready to discuss them. I will send you an email at the end of February letting you know your grade thus far.

Class policies:

- 1) You may bring a drink to class. Do not bring food to class.
- 2) If you use a laptop please sit in the back row so that you do not distract other students.
- 3) Papers must be handed in at the beginning of class on the days that they are due. If a paper is late 3% of the grade will be taken off for every day that it is late. A paper handed in after class on the day that it is due will count as one day late. Weekends count as days that a paper is late. **If you hand in a late paper you must make arrangements with me to hand it in.** If you hand it in without making arrangements there is a possibility that you will not get credit.
- 4) Quizzes are taken at the beginning of class. If you inform me ahead of time that you need to miss class you will be able to make it up once. If you miss quizzes repeatedly there is a chance that you will not be able to make them up.
- 5) You are responsible for keeping track of assignments and the class schedule. I suggest that you exchange email addresses with another student so that you can catch up on any notes or assignments that you might miss.
- 6) If you have a disability and need academic accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at (703) 993-2474. Accommodations are arranged through that office.

Honor Code:

This class operates under GMU's Honor Code, which states, "Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work." Plagiarism means presenting another person's words, ideas, or arguments as your own without giving that person credit. I am obligated to report all violations of the Honor Code to the Honor Committee. See <http://honorcode.gmu.edu>.

Course schedule:

Week 1 (January 23 and 25): Defining the topic.

Readings:

1. Joan Bristol, "A Trail of Precious Goods: Colonial Latin American Commodity History," *History Compass*, Volume 11, Issue 11. You can find this online by going through the E-Journals tab on the library website.
2. Bruce Robbins, "Commodity Histories," *PMLA*, Vol. 120, No. 2 (Mar., 2005) You can find this online by going through the E-Journals tab on the library website.

Week 2 (January 30 and February 1): What is a commodity?

Readings:

1. Marx, Capital, Chapter One: Commodities,” from the *Marxists Internet Archive*:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>
2. “World-System Theory,” from *The Globalization Website*:
<http://sociology.emory.edu/faculty/globalization/theories01.html>.

Monday, January 30 is the last day to add classes.

Week 3 (February 6 NO CLASS and February 8): The circulation and value of objects

Readings:

Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,” in *The Social Life of things*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge University Press, 1986. pp. 3-63. **ON BLACKBOARD**

Paper assignment # 1 is handed out on Thursday.

Quiz #1 on Thursday.

Week 4 (February 13 and 15): Sugar and Slavery

Readings:

1. Mintz, Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2.
2. “Commodifying Labour, Commodifying People,” on *Junto: A Group Blog on Early American History*.
<https://earlyamericanists.com/2014/09/25/commodifying-labour-commodifying-people/>.

Monday February 13 is the last day to drop classes with a 33% tuition penalty.

Week 5 (February 20 and 22): Sugar and Slavery

FEBRUARY 20 you will meet with Dr. George Oberle in Fenwick 1014A

Reading: Mintz, Chapters 3, 4, 5.

Paper assignment #1 is due on Thursday.

Quiz #2 on Thursday

Friday February 24 is the last day to drop classes with a 67% tuition penalty.

Monday February 27 – Friday March 31 is the selective withdrawal period.

Week 6 (February 27 and March 1): Chocolate, Tobacco, and Cultural Transmission

Reading: Norton, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4.

Week 7 (March 6 and 8): Chocolate, Tobacco, and Cultural Transmission

Reading: Norton, Chapters 5, 6, 7.

Week 8: Spring break! Enjoy!

Week 9: (March 20 and 22): Chocolate, Tobacco, and Cultural Transmission

Reading: Norton, Chapters 8, 9, 10.

Quiz #3 on Thursday.

Paper assignment #2 is handed out on Thursday.

Week 10 (March 27 and 29): Cotton, Labor, and Capitalism

Reading:

1. TBA.

2. Watch Sven Beckert's C-SPAN presentation on *Empire of Cotton*

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?324267-1/empire-cotton>

Week 11 (April 3 and 5): Bananas, Imperialism, and the Environment

Reading: Soluri, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4.

Week 12 (April 10 and 12): Bananas, Imperialism, and the Environment

Reading: Soluri, Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8.

Quiz #4 on Thursday

Paper assignment #2 is due on Thursday.

Week 13 (April 17 and 19): Cocaine, Medicine, and Criminalization

Reading: Gootenberg, Chapters 1, 2, 3.

Week 14: (April 24 and 26): Cocaine, Medicine, and Criminalization

Reading: Gootenberg, Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7.

Quiz #5 on Thursday.

Week 15 (May 1 and May 4): Preparing the final project

We will not have class these days. You may use the time to do your presentations in the

One Button Studio in the Gateway Library.

For more information and to schedule a recording session, visit

library.gmu.edu/onebutton.