

Through the Picture Window: Society and Culture, 1945-1960

- ❖ **Why did the American economy expand during the postwar period?**
- ❖ **In what ways were contrasting strains of conformity and innovation characteristics of the 1950s?**
- ❖ **What were the characteristics of America's burgeoning consumer culture?**
- **Americans were eager to pursue peacetime prosperity**
 - Divorce and homicide rates fell
 - Birthrate soared
- **Many social critics, writers, and artists, expressed growing sense of unease**
 - Society becoming too complacent, conformist, materialistic
 - Tension between **idealism** and **materialism**

People of Plenty

- **Remarkable prosperity**
 - Economy soared
 - Gross national product doubled between 1945 and 1960
 - By 1970, American produced and consumed two thirds of its goods, high standard of living
- **During 1950s, government officials assured that no one should fear economic collapse**
 - **Several factors contributed to prolonged economic surge**
 - Federal expenditures to meet military needs catapulted economy out of Great Depression
 - **High government spending** continued after Cold War
 - military budget represented most important stimulant to post-war economic boom
 - military research spawned new industries in chemicals, electronics, aviation
- **Other industrial nations had been devastated**
 - **American manufacturers enjoyed virtual monopoly over international trade**
 - **Technological innovations automated the workplace**
 - Use of computers, increased productivity
- **Major catalyst in promoting economic expansion was unleashing of pent-up consumer demand**
 - People were more willing to buy cars and houses
 - Purchasing frenzy

The GI Bill of Rights

- **Purchasing frenzy was indirectly financed by federal government**
 - **GI Bill of Rights** prevented downward spiral in economy
 - Led to creation of Veterans Administration, included provisional benefits
- **8 million veterans took advantage of \$12.5 billion in GI Bill subsidies to attend college or job-training**
 - Veterans bought homes
 - Increased college graduates
 - Best-educated workforce in the world

- **GI Bill democratized higher education**
 - College education brought many up to middle class
 - Eroded class barriers, but not racial barriers
 - African-American veterans did not receive equal benefit
 - Segregation in colleges
- **Historically black colleges could not expand quickly enough to meet demand**
 - Black veterans were denied admission because of overcrowded facilities
- **Return of veterans caused postwar baby-boom, peaked in 1957**
 - Demand for diapers, toys, medicine, schools, books, teachers, furniture, housing

An Expanding Consumer Culture

- **Baby boom was accompanied by construction boom**
 - Number of homeowners increased by 50% between 1945 and 1960
 - Latest appliances: refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, electric appliances
- **Most popular new produce was TV set**
 - Nine out of ten homes had one by 1970
 - *TV Guide* was fastest growing periodical
 - Replaced radio
- **Prosperity was more common**
 - Few exceptions to prevailing affluence
- **Many blacks were also beneficiaries of the wave of prosperity**
 - Earned higher wages
 - But lagged behind whites in their rate of improvement
 - Noticeable difference between black and white income
 - **Issues of race were ignored** in favor of fight against communism
- **Marketing specialists targeted consumers' desires and social envy**
 - Expenditure for advertising increased 1000%
 - **Advertising was a big contributor to postwar prosperity**
- **Paying for goods was no problem: age of the credit card had arrived**
 - Consumer credit soared
 - Shopping became a major recreational activity

The Suburban Frontier

- **Mass migration to suburbs**
 - **Technological advances in agricultural production reduced need for manual laborers**
 - People left farms for the city
- **Much of urban population growth occurred in the South, Southwest, and West**
 - Most migration occurred in the **sunbelt**: arc from Carolinas to California
 - **Air conditioning was developed by Willis Carrier**, became common household fixture
 - **Northeast remained most densely populated area**
- **Americans were spreading into metropolitan areas**
 - Suburbs grew faster than cities
 - Suburbia was dominant
- **William Levitt led suburban revolution**

- Built 10,600 houses
- Levittowns in Pennsylvania and New Jersey
- **Suburban revolution benefitted from federal assistance**
 - Issued loans
 - Federal Housing Administration made it easy for a builder to construct low-cost homes
 - Veterans got added benefits
- **Expanded automobile production facilitated rush to suburbs**
 - Car culture transformed social behavior
 - Local and state governments built roads
 - **Guiding force was federal government: authorized construction of highways, interstate expressways**
- **Americans rushed to take advantage of new living spaces**
 - **Motives for moving to suburbs were numerous**
 - Availability and spaciousness of homes, yards
 - Greater security
 - Better educational opportunities
 - Racial considerations: African Americans from the south migrated to cities of the North and Midwest—caused whites to move out
 - **White flight:** many whites were eager to maintain segregation
 - Blacks were discriminated from Levittown, Long Island

The Great Black Migration

- **Mass migration of rural southern blacks to urban North and Midwest was much larger than that after WWI, and social consequences were more dramatic**
 - Blacks sought jobs, wages, housing, equality
 - Chicago became capital of black America
- **Most black migrants were sharecroppers and farm laborers from the Mississippi Delta**
 - Delta produced cotton
 - Mechanical cotton picker displaced blacks
 - Slumlords gouged them for rent, employers refused them, union bosses denied membership
 - **Reality:** slum housing, joblessness, illiteracy, dysfunctional families, welfare dependency, street gangs, crime, racism
- **Wave of African Americans taxed resources of urban governments and patience of white racists**
 - White mob in Chicago assaults
 - National Guard had to quell disturbance
 - Chicago sought to deal with the migrants and alleviate racial stress by constructing huge all-black public housing project to accommodate newcomers
 - **Overcrowded racial enclaves were dismal, most remained in the ghettos**

A Conforming Culture

- **Social commentators of the time ignored people outside of middle-class mainstream**
 - Homogenized character
 - Social forces promoted common standards of behavior
 - **Suburban life itself encouraged uniformity**

- **Conformity was central social problem of the time**

Corporate Life

- **Composition of workforce and nature of work were changing**
 - Fewer people were self-employed
 - Manual labor gave way to mental labor
 - **White-collar workers (salaried) outnumbered blue-collar workers (hourly wage)**
 - **Government relaxed anti-trust activity, defense contracts promoted corporate concentration and consolidation**
 - **Dominance of corporate giants appeared in every major industry**
 - **Working atmosphere in big companies promoted conformity, not individualism**

Women's "Place"

- **Ideal middle class woman in *Life* magazine: 32 years old, pretty and popular, white suburban housewife, mother of four, married at 16**
 - Excellent wife, mother, volunteer, home manager
 - Hosted dinner parties, sang in church choir
- ***Life's* description of the middle class woman was symptomatic of a cult of feminine domesticity**
 - Soaring birthrate reinforced notion that women belonged at home
- **After war, women were forced to return to the domestic sphere**
 - Turned their wartime jobs over to returning veterans
 - Housewife and mother role

The Search for Community

- **Americans were moving from central cities to suburbs, from city to suburb, from suburb to suburb, from state to state**
 - **Major cause of mobility was the largest corporations' standard policy of relocating sales and managerial employees**
 - **flux led people to search for sense of community and rootedness**
 - joined civic clubs, garden clubs, bridge groups, carpools, babysitting groups
- **People also joined churches in record numbers**
 - Massive renewal of religious participation
 - Sale of Bibles soared
- **Eisenhower promoted belief in God**
 - Joined a church
 - Congress added the phrase one nation "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance
 - "In God we Trust" mandatory on all currency
- **Tone of religious revival of 1950s was upbeat and soothing**
 - Ministers coaxed, didn't harangue
- **Best salesman of gospel of reassuring "good news" was Norman Peale**
 - Champion of feel-good theology
 - ***The Power of Positive Thinking***
 - Offered how-to course in personal happiness

Neo-Orthodoxy

- **Positive thinking psychology struck some members of religious community as too shallow and misleading**
 - Argued that good news was just a way of promoting sense of belonging
- **Most significant spokesman for neo-orthodoxy was Reinhold Niebuhr**
 - Disdained popular religion of self-assurance and material success
 - Insisted that spiritual peace involved the pain of reality

Cracks in the Picture

- **Reinhold Niebuhr challenged moral complacency and social conformity**
 - Middle class prosperity masked rising poverty in ghettos
 - Sharp contrast between positive public mood and bitter social criticism

The Lonely Crowd

- **Criticism of postwar life began in the early 1950s and gathered momentum**
 - **Critics shared common fear: American in a sea of conformity**, content to succumb to the soul-defying demands of the corporate “rate race”
 - **The Affluent Society: John Galbraith** attacked prevailing notion that economic growth would solve social problems
 - **Emphasized the poverty still existed**
- **Postwar critics also questioned bliss of middle-class corporate and suburban life**
 - **The Crack in the Picture Window: John Keats** attacked life in suburban developments, ridiculed Levittown mass-produced communities for their homogeneity
- **Mass-produced suburban developments exhibited startling sameness**
 - Levittown encouraged and even enforced conformity
 - Same floor plan and price for each house
 - Homeowners were required to cut grass once a week
 - **Levittown was in many ways distinctive rather than representative: few were as uniform as Keats described**
 - Keats failed to recognize benefits that suburbs offered
- **Modern corporation was repeatedly cited by social critics as the primary villain**
 - **The Lonely Crowd: David Riesman** detected fundamental shift in dominant American personality
 - **“inner directed”**: deeply set basic values, self-reliant, strong-minded parents and elders
 - **“other-directed”**: replaced inner directed mindset of the 19th century, corporations favored popular people, concerned with being well liked rather than being independent, always trying to please the boss
- **Riesman amassed considerable evidence to show that the other-directed personality was not just an aspect of the business world; its premises were widely dispersed throughout middle class life.**
 - Dr. Benjamin Spock’s advice on raising children was influential
 - **The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care: Benjamin Spock** said parents should foster qualities that would enhance chances in popularity market
- **Critics were concerned with negative effects of managerial personality**
 - **White Collar Society: Wright Mills** attacked attributes and influence of modern corporate life

Alienation and Liberation

The Stage

- **Theatrical production reinforced Riesman's image of American society as a "lonely crowd" of individuals without internal values, grouping for a sense of belonging and affection**
 - **Death of a Salesman: Arthur Miller**
 - Protagonist Willy Loman, confused salesman in decline
 - No real friends, realizes that he has been leading a counterfeit existence

The Novel

- **The most enduring novels of the postwar period displayed preoccupation with the individual's struggle for survival amid the smothering and disorienting forces of mass society**
 - Characters are similar to Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*—searching for meaningful identity
- **Invisible Man: Ralph Ellison** explored them of the lonely individual by using a black narrator
 - Accentuated problem of alienation

Painting

- **Edward Hopper was an artist who explored them of desolate loneliness in postwar urban-industrial American life**
- **Group of painters in New York City decided that postwar society was so chaotic that it precluded any attempt at literal representation**
 - Jackson Pollock: anarchic technique, abstract expressionism, dominated international art field
 - Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko: abstract art

The Beats

- **Dangling Man: Saul Bellow** concludes that essence of life is the desire for pure freedom
 - Goal of expressionists: discard conventions, surmount constraints
 - **Beats: group of young writers, painters, and musicians**
 - Rebelled against the regimented horrors of war and mundane horrors of middle class life
- **Beats grew out of bohemian underground in New York's Greenwich Village**
 - Quest of sensibility and spontaneous way of life
 - Apolitical
 - Sought personal rather than social solutions to anxieties
 - **Road to salvation lay in drugs, sex, alcohol, jazz, street life, Buddhism, vagabond spirit**
 - Between San Francisco and New York
- **Existential mania for intense experience and frantic motion provided subject matter for the Beats' writing**
 - **Howl: Allen Ginsberg's** poem featured explicit sensuality and impressionistic attempt to catch color and dynamism of life
 - **On the Road: Jack Kerouac** portrayed Beats' life
 - Elicited sarcasm and anger from reviewers
 - Anarchic gaiety of Beats played important role for youth revolt in 1960s

Youth Culture and Delinquency

- **Young people occupied a distinctive place in postwar life**
 - Teen subculture began to emerge

- Teenagers had more money and freetime
- Vast new teen market; Hula-Hoops, rock and roll records, *Seventeen* magazine, Pat Boone movies
- Teens were immersed in abundance, ignorant of past depression
- **Most young people embraced values of their parents**
 - Average young American was more conservative than their parents
 - Silent generation: content to cavort at parties before landing a job with large corporations and marrying
- **General descriptions masked turbulence**
 - Wave of juvenile delinquency
 - **What was causing delinquency?**
 - Edgar Hoover insisted that problem was lack of religious training
 - Other pointed out growth of slums
 - Unprecedented mobility of people, access to automobiles

Rock and Roll

- **Many blamed delinquency on rock and roll**
 - **Alan Freed** coined the term *rock and Roll*
 - Euphemism for dancing and sex
 - Freed's radio program bridged gap between black and white music
- **Elvis Presley experimented with rock music**
 - Released Heartbreak Hotel in 1956
 - Defiance of adult conventions
 - Sexually suggestive stage performances
- **Cultural conservatives urged parents to destroy Presley's records because they promoted pagan life**
 - Patriotic groups claimed that rock and roll was a tool of Communist insurgents
 - Rock and roll survived assaults

A Paradoxical Era

- **Rock and roll would become one of the major vehicles of the youth revolt in the 1960s**
- **Little impact on the prevailing patterns of social and cultural life in the 1950s**
- **Benefits of abundance were not equally distributed—race issues**
- **Tension between innovation and convention**