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**
  o College education brought many up to middle class
  o Eroded class barriers, but not racial barriers
  o African-American veterans did not receive equal benefit
  o Segregation in colleges

• **Historically black colleges could not expand quickly enough to meet demand**
  o Black veterans were denied admission because of overcrowded facilities

• **Return of veterans caused postwar baby-boom, peaked in 1957**
  o Demand for diapers, toys, medicine, schools, books, teachers, furniture, housing

### An Expanding Consumer Culture

• **Baby boom was accompanied by construction boom**
  o Number of homeowners increased by 50% between 1945 and 1960
  o Latest appliances: refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, electric appliances

• **Most popular new produce was TV set**
  o Nine out of ten homes had one by 1970
  o *TV Guide* was fastest growing periodical
  o Replaced radio

• **Prosperity was more common**
  o Few exceptions to prevailing affluence

• **Many blacks were also beneficiaries of the wave of prosperity**
  o Earned higher wages
  o But lagged behind whites in their rate of improvement
  o Noticeable difference between black and white income
  o Issues of race were ignored in favor of fight against communism

• **Marketing specialists targeted consumers’ desires and social envy**
  o Expenditure for advertising increased 1000%
  o Advertising was a big contributor to postwar prosperity

• **Paying for goods was no problem: age of the credit card had arrived**
  o Consumer credit soared
  o Shopping became a major recreational activity

### The Suburban Frontier

• **Mass migration to suburbs**
  o Technological advances in agricultural production reduced need for manual laborers
  o People left farms for the city

• **Much of urban population growth occurred in the South, Southwest, and West**
  o Most migration occurred in the *sunbelt*: arc from Carolinas to California
  o *Air conditioning was developed by Willis Carrier*, became common household fixture
  o Northeast remained most densely populated area

• **Americans were spreading into metropolitan areas**
  o Suburbs grew faster than cities
  o 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 at 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