Chapter 18: Cultural Struggles of Industrial America, 1850-1895

Overview

As the nation’s political economy changed in the last half of the nineteenth century, so, too, did the varieties of entertainment. Theaters, music halls, concert saloons, baseball stadiums, and sports arenas were located in cities and city life came to represent fun and excitement. The industrialization of America profoundly changed American cultural values. In no area of life was that more obvious than in the male and female spheres. The old values did not fit or compliment the new industrial order. There is no question that immigrants to the U.S. during the last half of the century changed American cities. Many native-born Americans saw immigrants and their different languages, customs, and religious beliefs as a threat to American society. However for immigrants and their children ethnic identities, Italian-American for example, were a sign of assimilation into a broader American culture. Americans found a solution to the threat that immigrants posed by creating a “high culture.” It brought classical literature and the natural and social sciences together to create a culture in which white men were placed at the pinnacle of the evolutionary scale along with western European forms of government. Museums, libraries, and universities spread the word. The realists, writers and painters, embraced the world of the harsh realities of urban life; they rejected romanticism or the idealized life. They hoped to implant the realities of urban and industrial America into the great works of literature and painting.

Key Topics

The information in chapter 18 introduces you to the following key topics:

- The city generates new forms of popular culture.
- Conventional and unconventional gender distinctions in Victorian America.
- The cultural significance of immigration.
- The difference between “high” culture and “popular” culture.
- The flowering of artistic realism.

Chapter Outline with review questions

Anthony Comstock

The Varieties of Urban Culture
- Minstrel Shows as Cultural Nostalgia
- The Origins of Vaudeville
- Sports Become Professional
- World’s Fairs the Celebration of the City

The Elusive Boundaries of Male and Female
- The Victorian Construction of Male and Female
- Victorians Who Questioned Traditional Sexual Boundaries

Immigration as a Cultural Problem
- Josiah Strong Attacks Immigration
- From Immigrants to Ethnic Americans
- The Catholic Church and its Limits in Immigrant Culture
- The Political Economy of Immigrant Culture

The Creation of High Culture
- High Culture Becomes Sacred
- The Creation of a Cultural Establishment
- The Emergence of the Modern University

Feature: Focus on Youth: Jane Addams at College
- Social Darwinism and the Growth of Scientific Racism
- Artistic Realism Embraces Urban and Industrial America
- The Triumph of Literary Realism Painting Realism
- Is Photography Art?

Conclusion
Annotated chapter outline

Vignette: Anthony Comstock’s name is famous for a Congressional act known as the “Comstock Law” which banned the production, distribution, and public display of obscene materials. It was not the culmination of his campaign to stamp out vice in America. As a special agent of the post office, Comstock had wide-ranging powers to prosecute offenders and he spent his life doing just that. His primary concern was protecting children from the predators he believed American cities produced. Comstock’s fears for children were part of a much larger social picture that was changing due in large part to the development of an industrial economy.

What motivated Anthony Comstock’s crusade against vice?

The Varieties of Urban Culture: As the nation’s political economy changed in the last half of the nineteenth century, so, too, did the varieties of entertainment. Theaters, music halls, concert saloons, baseball stadiums, and sports arenas were located in cities and city life came to represent fun and excitement.

- Minstrel shows were popular from the 1830s to the turn of the century. Early minstrel shows were outrageously racist and characters based on extreme stereotypes. Nonetheless, Americans, black, white, and immigrant flocked to them. Ownership was consolidated in the hands of a few and as the new century dawned the minstrel show was still nostalgic, popular, and profitable.
- Vaudeville was born in the cities and appealed to urban populations, male and female, by featuring variety shows as well as serious actors and singers. The elaborate theaters were a far cry from the early more raucous days of vaudeville
- Professional sports, baseball, football, prize fighting, were also becoming a popular forms of public entertainment, appealing to all classes of Americans. But sports also reinforced social distinctions: working-class fans sat in the bleachers, the elite in box seats, and African-American players were banned from the field. Minstrel shows, vaudeville, prize fighting, professional baseball and football had one thing in common with industrial America: it was run as a business by a handful of owners who tried to destroy their competition as they maximized their profits.
- During the last half of the nineteenth century, world’s fairs were held in a number of cities to showcase the host nation’s technological and cultural achievements of industrial capitalism and to celebrate the triumph of technology and the progress of humanity. The World’s Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 not only celebrated the nation’s technological advances but also its superiority over African-American and American Indians.

How did minstrel shows change over time?

The Elusive Boundaries of Male and Female: The industrialization of America profoundly changed American cultural values. In no area of life was that more obvious than in the male and female spheres. The old values did not fit or compliment the new industrial order.

- By the nineteenth century, the physical differences between males and females had been embellished to include emotional, intellectual, and psychological differences as well. By the mid-nineteenth century the sexes were described as “opposite”—men being active, strong, and worthy of being educated; women were passive, weak, and not worthy of being educated. No group of men perpetuated, strengthened, and elaborated on this than the medical community. The professionalization and standardization of the medical community took control of women’s reproductive issues campaigning to restrict midwives and regulate contraceptive information.
- To suggest that all Americans followed in the thinking of the Victorians would be foolish. One of the reasons the Victorians were so scared and so vocal is that they saw men and women living contrary to the Victorians’ definition of “normal.” Prostitutes, sexually provocative entertainment, and even clothing challenged the Victorians’ definition of propriety. It was the city, some argued, that caused the degradation of society; others blamed the immigrants who were changing the culture of the city.

Did urban life transform sexuality in the nineteenth century?

Immigration as a Cultural Problem: There is no question that immigrants to the U.S. during the last half of the century changed American cities. Many native-born Americans saw immigrants and their different languages, customs, and religious beliefs as a threat to American society. However for immigrants and their children and ethnic identity, Italian-American, for example, was a sign of assimilation into a broader American culture.
• Much of the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the last half of the nineteenth century was based on racist or at least ethnocentric attitudes. The future of Anglo-Saxon civilization and the United States itself were threatened by these immigrants.

• Those who feared the immigrants and what they could do to America tended to lump all immigrants together or at least to lump them by nationality. What they did not recognize were the tremendous regional differences within ethnic groups. Once in America, even the regional distinctions declined, due, in part, to secular fraternal organizations, which encouraged immigrants to think of themselves as ethnic groups who shared the same national ancestry.

• The Roman Catholic Church played a complicated role in the development of ethnic cultures among Americans. In some locations it preserved the values of the old country; in others it aided assimilation. In North America bishops pushed for the standardization of Catholicism (uniform catechisms and bureaucratic control). Parochial schools reinforced the growth of distinctively American ethnic identities.

• One of the first things native-born reformers noticed about immigrants was their tendency to large families. At a time when the number of children in middle class families was decreasing, immigrant families were large, due, in part, from the need of immigrant families for more workers. What the reformers neglected to notice was that immigrants were largely working class.

How accurate was Josiah Strong’s view of immigrant culture?

The Creation of High Culture: Americans found a solution to the threat that immigrants posed by creating a “high culture”. It brought classical literature and the natural and social sciences together to create a culture in which white men were placed at the pinnacle of the evolutionary scale along with western European forms of government. Museums, libraries, and universities spread the word.

• Purveyors of the concept of high culture were as concerned about the working class at the bottom as the greedy capitalists at the top of the social hierarchy. The reformers who were the purveyors of the concept of high culture, joined forces to transform American cities into centers of high art and culture distinction.

• Shakespeare, orchestral music, and opera were removed from the vaudevillian repertoire and reserved to the stage where they could be appreciated by an educated elite. Great opera houses and symphony halls were constructed and sustained by private patrons along with art museums. Culture was now associated with monumental architecture not immigrant neighborhoods.

• Private universities flourished as well and they, too, were reorganized to reflect the professionalism of the day. Universities boasted faculties of specialists dedicated to research and training future scholars. Literature reflected the same high culture values and the new fields of social and political science supported the notion of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Science had come to support the ethnocentric values of the day.

• Social scientists used their interpretation of Charles Darwin’s studies to support their social theories. The leading theorist of “social Darwinism” was the Englishman Herbert Spencer. His use of the concept of the survival of the fittest seemed to explain wealth and success as well as poverty and failure; the superiority of whites and the inferiority of blacks. Inequality was not only normal, it was natural, or so the Social Darwinists believed. Science had come to explain and rationalize a world divided into superior and inferior societies and individuals.

Did “high culture” offer an escape from urban, industrial America?

Artistic Realism Embraces Urban and Industrial America: The realists, writers and painters, embraced the world of the harsh realities of urban life; they rejected romanticism or the idealized life. They hoped to implant the realities of urban and industrial America into the great works of literature and painting.

• Realists in literature tried to bridge the gap between high culture and popular culture by making great literature out of the ordinary details of everyday life. Characters had human flaws and capabilities. The result for American literature was a blending of popular culture with the forms of high art.

• Painting was also influenced by realism. Whether the subject was urban or rural the realists abandoned romanticism and romanticized scenes.

• A new technology, photography, created an entirely new medium of artistic expression. Photographs depicted reality and photography created a new controversy in the art world: is photography art? The debate was as much about the subject or intent of the photograph as it was about what counted as culture in the new political economy of industrial capitalism.
What was the philosophy behind artistic realism?

**Feature: Focus on Youth: Jane Addams at College:** To use a term popular in a later generation of college students, Jane Addams and her like-minded classmates wanted an education that was “relevant” to the world they lived in -- not to the one of previous generations. Addams and her classmates used their zeal for a new kind of academic coursework to modernize their college curriculum. Their work resulted in the “seminary” they attended becoming a college and awarding her and another female classmate a bachelor of arts degree (a remarkable thing for the time).

**Conclusion:** The triumph of industrial capitalism caused Americans to question -- and answer -- what counted as “culture” in the nineteenth century. The changes that had come to the American city offered opportunities unavailable at an earlier time and it also offered troubling changes. Americans coped with these changes in a variety of ways.

**Making links to other ideas** Using the maps and websites, in addition to your prepared lectures and other assignments, can give you more resources to enable your students to see that history is much more than memorizing names and dates. You will find that the websites are even more comprehensive and adaptable than described and because they have been collected here in one volume you have a world of information no further away than the click of your mouse. If you are new to the web's opportunities, you will be pleasantly surprised at the breadth and depth of the information available in these sites.

Map 01. What has transpired between the 1850-1859 map and the 1900-1909 map to have effected the settlement patterns reflected here? Why is the movement north and south rather than east and west?

Map 02. What does this map tell you about where immigrants settled in the United States? What accounts for large concentrations of immigrants in some areas and few in others?

**Web connections and resources** Consider using these websites to supplement your students’ reading and analytical skills. The sites were chosen because of their relevance to the material in the chapter -- not just to mirror it but to provide additional materials and perspectives. Questions from the student study guide have been included so that you can use or amend them to your own needs. Your students may find it insightful for you to guide them through the site as you help them develop research strategies.

“Cultural Struggles of Industrial Capitalism” www.prenhall.com/boydston/frenchcanadian

In 1880 Colonel Carroll D. Wright, head of the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, founder of the scientific collection of data in the U.S., and tireless advocate for causes such as temperance, shorter working hours, and an end to child labor, wrote in an official report that the “Canadian French are the Chinese of the Eastern States.” Outraged French Canadians demanded an opportunity to prove “we are a white people.” The controversy occasioned by Wright's remarks provide a window on the ways various groups of Americans thought about who was and was not “white.”

1. Using the information presented at this site how did the French Canadians set about proving they were “a white people?”

“Metropolitan Lives” http://nmaa-ryder.si.edu/collections/exhibits/metlives/index.html

See the Ashcan artists’ scenes of the realism of the city and read informative essays that discuss class relations, immigration, and changing gender norms accompany the paintings.

1. Where did the term “ashcan” originate and why was that term applied to this school of art?
2. Why was it important to the artists of the ashcan school to portray life as they saw it instead of an idealized version of life?

“Forms of Variety Theatre” http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vsforms.html#ms

Through this online exhibit on popular entertainment from 1870-1920 read about variety shows, vaudeville, minstrel shows, and musical reviews. Browse through a collection of online playbills and programs and listen to sound recordings.
1. How have minstrel shows changed over time?
2. What caused these changes to come about?

The traditional gender roles of Victorian women of both middle and working class status are examined on this site through the use of literature sources.
1. What is the relationship of money and making money so much a part of these women’s experiences and definitions of who they are?
2. How did wage labor change the Victorian definition of womanhood?

Analytical reading Your students may need more experience analyzing a short reading passage so that he or she can determine its component parts. They may need help identifying primary and supporting information as well as the author’s analysis. The analytical reading passages and the questions from the student study guide have been duplicated in the instructor’s manual for your use. Your students may need direction and encouragement in using them.

Realists tried to bridge the gap between “high” and “popular” culture by making great literature out of the ordinary details of everyday life. To “enjoy the every-day life,” Sarah Orne Jewett explained in Deephaven, one must “find pleasure in thought and observation of simple things, and have an instinctive, delicious interest in what to other eyes is unflavored dullness.” By writing about failed businessmen or runaway slaves, writers like [William Dean]Howells and [Mark] Twain hoped to reveal both courage and cowardice in the lives of ordinary men and women. “Let fiction cease to lie about life,” Howells declared. “Let it portray men and women as they are... let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know--the language of unaffected people everywhere.” This was the great achievement of Huckleberry Finn. Twain wrote it entirely in the dialect of ordinary people in the Mississippi Valley.

The characters in realistic novels were far from the saintly heroes and coarse villains of sentimental fiction. Realistic figures were flawed men and women who struggled with the moral dilemmas they encountered in their daily lives. In Howells’s greatest novel, Silas Lapham had to decide whether to mislead the men who wanted to buy his failing paint company. Huck Finn had to decide whether to turn in a runaway slave. Yet neither of these Lapham nor Finn was “heroic” in the way that Dickens’s heroes were. Lapham was an ill-educated social climber who talked too much, especially when he drank. Huck Finn was a barely literate seeker of adventure who played hooky, spoke improper English, and spun absurd fantasies. In the end both Silas Lapham and Huck Finn made the right moral decisions, but neither found their decisions easy to make.
1. What was it about realism in art and literature that Americans found so appealing?
2. Why did the realists feel uncomfortable with the notion of “heroes?”

Writing The questions or writing prompts from the student study guide have been duplicated here for your use. These writing topics make good lecture topics especially if you help your students see the development of the idea in lecture format before they refine the idea in their writing assignments.
1. In what ways did the industrialization of America change American cultural values?
2. In what ways did the industrialization of America change interpersonal relations?
3. In what ways did immigrants contribute to or cause those changes?
4. Explain why the development of “high culture” can be seen as a reaction to changes in American cultural values and expressions.
5. Explain the love/hate attitude that developed about American cities.

Lecture Strategies Ultimately the lecture is where you impart, or profess, your knowledge for the benefit of your students. These strategies were designed around the textbook and if your classroom strategy is to use the organization of the text to organize your course content, these lecture ideas may prove helpful. However, if you
lecture around themes please see the section entitled “Thematic Lecture Topics.” You may find that you are more comfortable with and your students are more responsive to a combination of the two.

The material in chapter 18 is a perfect illustration of the application of the theme of political economy. In a concise discussion, your students can see clear manifestations of how economic change affected Americans’ lives (subsequent chapters look at government’s role in the development of the industrial economy). Discuss changes in family values especially in light of immigration and urbanization.

Gender issues are also a manifestation of political economic changes and how Americans fought for change and fought to hold on to the past is a potentially interesting topic. Chapter 18 is also a good vehicle for discussing the problems of “presentism” for historians.

Help your students identify what American cultural values were then, how they changed, what caused them to change, and how Americans reacted to those changes. When cultures are undergoing tremendous stress it is not unusual for interesting adaptive strategies to develop to help people cope with the changes and to try and hang on to the past. The notion of “high” culture is a compelling example especially if you consider the common attitude of the time that “immigrants are changing America -- and not for the good.”

This chapter also offers an opportunity for you to discuss and illustrate how historians use art and literature to aid in their understanding of the past. The history of sports is also an interesting way of studying the past.

Penguin Classics

In Immigrant Voices: Twenty-four Narratives on Becoming an American, edited by Gordon Hunter, New York: A Signet Classic, 1999, Hunter has chosen twenty-four narratives of immigrants to tell the stories of immigrants’ transformations to Americans. Added to the predominantly European immigrant stories in this late 19th century section of the text are those of the Syrian Abraham Rihbany. Consider the following examples as pertinent to the material covered in this chapter: Jacob Riis discussed his experiences trying to find a publisher and supporter of his photographic documentary work. His excerpt is from his The Making of an America. Others in Immigrant Voices include an excerpt from Margaret Anna Cusak, an Irish Catholic nun who immigrated to the U.S. in 1884 with the intention of setting up a new Order of the Poor Claires in America. This selection from her book entitled The Nun of Kenmare discusses her troubles getting funding from the Catholic Church to set up her order.

Jacob A. Riis, How the Other Half Lives with an introduction and notes by Luc Sante. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. The Danish immigrant Jacob A. Riis arrived in America in 1870. With no particular talents, Riis finally found meaningful work as a police reporter for the Tribune and later the Evening Sun. It was as a reporter that Riis used his journalistic skills to convey the reality of life in New York’s slums. Words alone could not move the public to share Riis’s concern for New York’s children living and dying on the streets. The invention of flash photography in 1887 changed that as Riis armed himself with a camera to document the squalor and poverty. His slide shows did what no words could do and helped Riis launch urban reform programs. The Penguin edition contains thirty photographs alongside Riis’s textual description of life in New York’s slums. This book can be used to convey a reality of which many students are unaware but it can also be used to examine the now-common form of documentary journalism, photojournalism, and social reform movements. It is also a testament to what one individual can do to make a difference in helping to solve social problems.

Horatio Alger, Jr. Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks with an introduction by Alan Trachtenberg. New York: A Signet Classic, 1990. Published in book form in 1868, Ragged Dick typifies the classic nineteenth century American story -- a young man raised alone on the streets of New York grows to maturity and respectability. Ragged Dick was written primarily for young boys who were cautioned, encouraged, and threatened in this morality tale of characters gone bad or rescued by their own character and efforts. In a larger sense, however, Horatio Alger’s novel is one of transformation. Alger capitalized on the very popular and powerful perception that any American who took advantage of opportunity, hard work, and luck could end up on “easy street.” Ragged Dick was the classic “rags to riches” American success story. For an American history survey class, Ragged Dick can become an introduction not only to period literature but also to the broader categories of resources historians can use in research. If you are discussing American culture, there is no better example of the American myth that every immigrant can grow up to be Richard Hunter, Andrew Carnegie, or Bill Gates.

Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, with a new introduction by Padgett Powell. New York: A Signet Classic, 1997. An example of the realism discussed in Chapter 18, Huckleberry Finn remains a classic 116 years after it was published.