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. 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. Americans found a solution to the threat that immigrants posed by creating a “high culture.” 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 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

Review Questions
- What motivated Anthony Comstock’s crusade against vice?
- How did minstrel shows change over time?
- Did urban life transform sexuality in the nineteenth century?
- How accurate was Josiah Strong’s view of immigrant culture?
- Did “high culture” offer an escape from urban, industrial America?
- What was the philosophy behind artistic realism?

Annotated chapter outline
Anthony Comstock’s Crusade Against Vice: 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. His primary concern was protecting children from the predators he believed American cities produced.

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, vaudeville, professional sports, baseball, football, prize fighting, were also becoming a popular forms of public entertainment, appealing to all classes of Americans. 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.
- 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.

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 complement 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. No group of men perpetuated, strengthened, and elaborated on this more than the medical community.
- 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.” It was the city, some argued, that caused the degradation of society; others blamed the immigrants who were changing the culture of the city.

**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.

- Much of the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the last half of the nineteenth century was based on racist or at least ethnocentric attitudes.
- 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.

**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.

- 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.
- 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.

**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.

**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.

**Analytical reading** These questions refer to the passage “The Triumph of Literary Realism” on pages 443-444.

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”?

**Lecture Strategies**

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 both 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.

Supplements: Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students’ comprehension and performance.

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 nineteenth 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.


American Stories: Biographies in United States History by Katheryn A. Abbott and Patricia Hagler Minter. See Chapter 17, Industrializing America, 1865-1914, for biographical sketches of Thomas Edison and Samuel Gompers.

Documents Collection see Part Eighteen: Industrializing America
*Charles Loring Brace, “The Life of the Street Rats” 1872
*Progress and Poverty  1879
*The Gilded Age  1880
*Richard K. Fox, from Coney Island Frolics 1883
*Address by George Engel, Condemned Haymarket Anarchist 1886
*Edward Bellamy, from Looking Backward 1888
*The Assassination of President Garfield  1889
*Ida B. Wells-Barnett, from A Red Record 1895
*Booker T. Washington, Atlanta Exposition Address 1895
*George Waring, Sanitary Conditions in New York 1897
*Lincoln Steffens, from The Shame of the Cities 1904
*Etiquette for the Upper Classes  1919
*Scientific Management 1919

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk, although previous and subsequent parts have relevant documents.