



WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

Troubles in the Promised Land

In the twentieth century, millions of African Americans left the rural South and migrated to cities in the North and West. Yet, many of these migrants were disappointed. Claude Brown, who grew up in Harlem, wrote about their disillusionment in his novel *Manchild in the Promised Land*.

“The children of these disillusioned colored pioneers inherited the total lot of their parents—their disappointments, the anger. To add to their misery, they had little hope of deliverance. For where does one run to when he’s already in the Promised Land?”

—Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land*

Dissent and Discontent

Objectives

- Summarize the arguments made by critics who rejected the culture of the fifties.
- Describe the causes and effects of urban and rural poverty.
- Explain the problems that many minority group members faced in the postwar era.

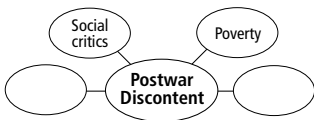
Terms and People

beatnik
inner city

urban renewal
termination policy

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas Record the main ideas and supporting details.



Why It Matters Despite the prosperity of the 1950s, not all people benefited. Some, such as Claude Brown, were left out and had little hope of deliverance. Others, who had benefited, wondered whether all of the material things they acquired had actually led to a better life. The discontents of the 1950s would manifest the first signs of the dissent that would dominate the 1960s. **Section Focus Question:** Why were some groups of Americans dissatisfied with conditions in postwar America?

Critics Reject the Fifties Culture

The failure of society to provide equal opportunities to minorities was one source of discontent during the postwar era. Another was the belief that while material conditions were better in the 1950s, the *quality* of life had not improved. Many intellectuals and artists did not consider homes in the suburbs, shopping centers, and an unending supply of new gadgets as representing a better life.

Objecting to Conformity Many social critics complained about an emphasis on conformity. In a book called *The Lonely Crowd*, sociologists David Riesman and Nathan Glazer lamented that Americans had sacrificed their individualism in order to fit into the larger community. They also criticized the power of advertising to mold public tastes. The theme of alienation, or the feeling of being cut off from mainstream society, dominated a number of the most popular novels of the era. The bestseller *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, by Sloan



The Rebel

James Dean starred in the movie *Rebel Without a Cause*, which seemed to symbolize the way many young people felt at the time.

Vocabulary Builder

affluence—(AF loo uhns) *n.*
abundance or riches; wealth

Wilson, followed a World War II veteran who could not find real meaning in life after the war. Holden Caulfield, the main character in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, a favorite among many teens, mocked what Salinger saw as the phoniness of adult society.

Although published in 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* would describe the plight of the suburban housewife during the 1950s. By the 1960s, Friedan would be at the forefront of a movement to change the social and political status of women in American society.

The Beats Reject Middle-Class Life An additional critique of American society came from a small group of writers and artists called **beatniks**, or the beats. The beats refused to conform to accepted ways of dressing, thinking, and acting. Conformity, they insisted, stifled individualism. They displayed their dislike of American society by careless dress and colorful jargon.

In their poems, such as Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," and novels, such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the beats lambasted what they saw as crass materialism and conformity of the American middle class. Many Americans, in turn, were outraged by their behavior.

✔ **Checkpoint** Why did many intellectuals and artists criticize American culture during the 1950s?

Rural and Urban Poverty

Hidden behind the new household appliances, the spreading suburbs, the burgeoning shopping malls, and the ribbons of highways was a very different United States. It was a nation of urban slums, desperate rural poverty, and discrimination. People who were poor and dispossessed were well hidden.

In an influential 1962 book entitled *The Other America*, Michael Harrington shocked many Americans by arguing that poverty was widespread in the United States. Harrington claimed that 50 million Americans, one fourth of the nation, lived in poverty. Despite American **affluence**, Harrington said, poverty plagued African Americans in the inner cities, rural whites in areas such as Appalachia, and Hispanics in migrant farm labor camps and urban barrios. Harrington argued that Americans could not afford to ignore the existence of the poor:

Primary Source

"The poor live in a culture of poverty. [They] get sick more than anyone else in the society. . . . Because they are sick more often and longer than anyone else, they lose wages and work and find it difficult to hold a steady job. And because of this, . . . their prospect is to move to an even lower level . . . toward even more suffering."

—Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, 1962

Cities Suffer a Decline During the decades that followed World War II, African Americans and other nonwhite minorities moved in great numbers from rural areas to cities. Most migrated in search of better economic opportunities. In the same period, however, American cities were suffering a severe decline as middle-class white families moved to the suburbs.

The loss of the middle class hurt cities economically because the middle class paid a large share of the taxes. It hurt them politically, as well, because as the suburbs gained population, they also gained representation in state legislatures and the national government. This combination of declining economic and political power put a serious strain on cities, leading to a deterioration of services, such as garbage removal and street repair. In turn, as the conditions

worsened and crime increased in what was now called the **inner city**, more of the middle class decided to move to the suburbs. Inner city refers to the older, central part of a city with crowded neighborhoods in which low-income, usually minority, groups live. Inner cities are often plagued with problems such as inadequate housing and schools, as well as crime.

Federal, state, and local governments tried to reverse the downward trend in American cities by developing **urban renewal** projects. With these projects, the government cleared large tracts of older housing and built freeways and developments which, it was hoped, would “revitalize” downtown areas. Unfortunately, the projects often backfired. Urban renewal drove people from their homes to make room for the new projects and highways. The poor were forced to seek housing in neighborhoods that were already overcrowded and overburdened. One resident of East Harlem, New York, who lost his home to an urban renewal project observed:

Primary Source

“Nobody cared what we wanted when they built this place. They threw our houses down and pushed us there and pushed our friends somewhere else. We don’t have a place around here to get a cup of coffee or a newspaper even, or borrow fifty cents.”

—*America’s History Since 1865*

The federal government tried to ease the shortage of affordable housing by constructing public housing. At the time, these housing projects seemed a god-send to those who lived there. Rent was cheap and the residents often enjoyed certain services, like hot running water, for the first time in their lives. Yet, since the public housing was often built in poor neighborhoods, the projects led to an even greater concentration of poverty. This, in turn led to other problems, such as crime.

The Rural Poor Also Suffer The plight of the rural poor was just as bad if not worse than that of the urban poor. Mississippi Delta sharecroppers, coal

Vocabulary Builder

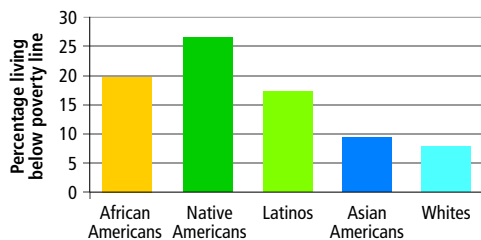
trend—(trehnd) *n.* general or prevailing course, as of events, a discussion, etc.

The Faces of Poverty

As revealed in Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, poverty existed in urban and rural America. Crowded city tenements, such as the one shown at left below, were usually homes to large numbers of poor African Americans. In rural areas, poor whites and blacks endured lives of hardship. Below, a mother and her children stand in the doorway of a ragged shack.

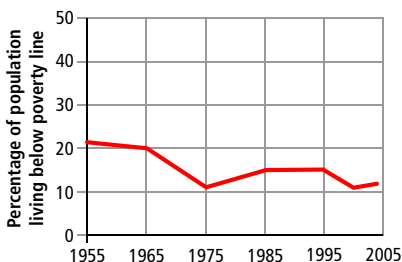


Breakdown of Poverty by Ethnicity, 2006



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

Poverty in the United States, 1955–2005




SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

Graph Skills The number of people living below the poverty line decreased between 1955 and 2006. However, many Americans continue to struggle to find the steady jobs and decent housing that will help them break through the poverty cycle. *What percentage of Americans lived below the poverty line in 1965? Why do you think the poverty rate remains higher among minorities?*

to dominate farm production. Many independent small-farm owners found it difficult to compete with the large farms and slipped into poverty.

Many farmers responded by leaving their rural communities behind, joining the waves of the poor who relocated to the city. Others remained behind, wondering if they would ever get to enjoy the benefits of the new economy.

 **Checkpoint** How did the federal government respond to the decline of American cities?

“Other Americans” Face Injustice

During the postwar years, the battle for civil rights in the South began to gain headlines. Yet, in the same time period, African Americans and other minorities also fought for equality in the urban north and west. Central to their struggles were efforts to overcome housing and employment discrimination.

Puerto Ricans Latinos from Puerto Rico and Mexico and Native Americans faced many of the same problems that African Americans encountered in the years following World War II. Puerto Rican migrants to New York City, for example, often found themselves clustered together in many of the poorest inner city neighborhoods with employment opportunities limited by both formal and informal forms of discrimination. As newcomers whose native language was not English, they enjoyed little political power. Thus, they received little help from city governments in getting better services, education, or an end to discriminatory practices.



Mexicans Both Mexicans and Mexican Americans faced a similar situation in the United States. During World War II, the U.S. government had established the bracero program as a means to address the shortage of agricultural workers. *Braceros* was a term for Mexican migrant farmworkers in the United States. The program gave temporary visas to Mexican immigrants. By 1964, 3 million Mexicans had worked in the United States under the program, most of them as farm laborers. Many were exploited and cheated by their employers. Mexican workers followed crops from state to state. Often, children worked alongside their parents. The migrants had little power to oppose the exploitation, for if they complained about conditions, employers threatened to deport them back to Mexico. One U.S. Department of Labor official called the program “legalized slavery.”

One champion of the rights of Mexican migrant workers, Ernesto Galarza, joined the effort to organize unions for Mexican farm laborers.


HISTORY MAKERS

Ernesto Galarza (1905–1984)

Born in Mexico, Galarza came with his family to Sacramento, California, at age six. For a time, he worked as a farm laborer. More fortunate than most Mexican American children, he succeeded in school and eventually received a Ph.D. He began to help migrant farmworkers—many of them Mexican Americans—organize unions. His book, *Merchants of Labor*, exposed the poor working conditions of the braceros.



Native Americans In 1953, the federal government enacted the **termination policy**, a major change in the rules governing Native Americans. The law sought to end tribal government and to relocate Native Americans to the nation's cities. It also terminated federal responsibility for the health and welfare of Native Americans. Proponents of the policy argued that it would free American Indians to assimilate, or merge, into American society. While some Native Americans praised the intent of the program, most came to agree with Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon who argued that it made things worse for them. “[T]he social and economic devastation which these policies have wrought upon many groups has been tremendous. . . . While these problems were already severe among Indian societies generally, they have become epidemic among terminated Indians.”

 **Checkpoint** What were some of the problems that minorities had to overcome in the postwar era?

SECTION

4 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
Web Code: nea-1306

Comprehension

- 1. Terms and People** Explain how each term below relates to problems or issues in the 1950s.
 - beatnik
 - urban renewal
 - termination policy
- 2. NoteTaking Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas** Use your concept web to answer the Section Focus Question: Why were some groups of Americans dissatisfied with conditions in postwar America?

Writing About History

- 3. Quick Write: Credit Sources** When you use quotes or ideas from sources in your research paper, you must provide proper credit. One way to do this is to list the author and page number of the material you have used in parentheses following the statement. If you have used the Internet, list the Web site. Research a topic from this section and write a paragraph using two sources. Credit the sources where appropriate and list them at the end.

Critical Thinking

- 4. Summarize** Summarize the arguments made by critics who rejected the culture of the fifties.
- 5. Synthesize Information** During the 1950s, many middle-class Americans were unaware of poverty. Are poor people invisible today? Explain.
- 6. Draw Conclusions** Why would the bracero program attract Mexican workers? What disadvantages did these workers face compared with other workers in the United States?