

The Fifties in America - Culture of conformity

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During the 1950's, many Americans began to identify conformity, an unquestioning similarity in belief and behavior among the majority of people, as a characteristic of their society. In the years following the 1950's, people continued to think of the decade as a period of conformity, especially in contrast to the social upheavals of the 1960's.

Define conformity.

Describe what a "culture of conformity" is.

A number of connected historical influences contributed to the apparent uniformity of American culture during the decade. First, adult Americans during this time had lived through the crises of the Depression and World War II. These experiences made them value stability and material prosperity as goals in their own lives. Also, prosperity was widely available to Americans. The rapid growth of the American economy made possible a standard of living that would have been beyond the dreams of earlier generations. This relatively high standard of living tended to focus on the consumption of consumer goods, which were abundant as a result of mass production and thus were consumed by a large portion of the population.

The construction of standardized housing in the suburbs made home ownership more common than ever before. The suburbs also tended to put people in rows of similar houses. Moreover, the baby boom from the late 1940's to the early 1960's tended to make suburban residents into nuclear families that were primarily concerned with taking care of children. Parenthood often encouraged people to seek lifestyles that were safe and orderly, instead of those that were varied and experimental. The rise of network television tended to create uniformity in entertainment and communication and to promote a standardized consumerism through advertising. Finally, the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union frequently led to fear of unorthodox ideas. The general suspicion of new or unusual ideas, combined with the concentration on material prosperity, made many Americans uncomfortable with broad plans for personal or social change.

Identify the six historical causes of the 1950s culture of conformity.

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LEGACY OF THE DEPRESSION AND WAR

The Great Depression was the most severe economic crisis among Western industrialized nations in modern history. Historians and economists usually identify the beginning of the Depression as the collapse of stock market prices on the New York Stock Exchange in October, 1929. From 1929 to 1932, prices of stocks dropped by 80 percent. Since banks had invested their customers' money in the market, banks lost money and nearly half of them closed between 1929 and 1933. Bank failures and a loss of confidence in the economy led businesses and consumers to cut back on spending. In turn, companies cut back on production, and employment decreased drastically. By 1932, one--fourth to one--third of those in the U.S. labor force were unemployed.

Describe the economic conditions the U.S. and other countries faced during the Great Depression.

The Great Depression lasted throughout the 1930's. For adults during the 1950's, hard economic times were a recent experience and often a defining experience of childhood or adolescence. As a result, Americans during the 1950's often saw job security and financial stability as their most important goals. Ownership of a home was an especially central symbol of a stable way of life.

Explain how the Great Depression helped create a culture of conformity.

Although the economy improved somewhat over the course of the 1930's, the Depression did not end until the United States entered World War II in 1941. By 1945, more than twelve million Americans were on active service in the military. Those who remained at home as civilians experienced shortages and rationing of goods, as well as anxiety over the safety of friends and family members in uniform.

CONFORMISM IN AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY

In 1958, economist John Kenneth Galbraith published his influential book The Affluent Society. Galbraith argued that throughout most of human history, the central economic problem had been the production of enough goods to meet basic human needs. However, by the 1950's, he argued, the modern economy of North America (United States and Canada) had largely solved this problem. Instead, the problem of the affluent society had become what goods should be produced and how those goods should be distributed. Galbraith maintained that production by profit-seeking companies led to an emphasis on meeting the desires of individual consumers and on stimulating those desires through marketing.

The prosperity that came after so many years of economic hardship and war did encourage Americans to concentrate on consuming goods. The mass production of these goods made them widely available, and it also meant that people in the United States and Canada were purchasing and using the same sorts of products.

Many people were conscious of the conformity of their materialistic society and felt uncomfortable about it. In 1950, sociologist David Riesman published a widely read analysis of the consequences of prosperity, The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character. In it, Riesman argued that different types of economies tend to produce different character types: For example, agricultural economies had resulted in "tradition-directed" people, who modeled their lives on ideas of the past. The changes brought about by industrializing societies tended to make people "inner-directed," individualistic, and driven by their own consciences. Riesman described his own time as "other-directed": In a time of abundance, consuming goods and interacting with other people became the most important activities, so that the prevailing character tended to become sensitive to others but also conformist.

Describe the economic problem that the United States has solved by the 1950s. How did this encourage a culture of conformity?

GROWTH OF THE SUBURBS

During the nineteenth century, North American society was primarily rural. The 1920 U.S. Census was the first to show a majority of Americans living in urban areas. Fifty years later, the 1970 Census was the first to show a suburban majority. The greatest suburban growth occurred during the 1950's as a result of the mass production of housing and the construction of an extensive highway system.

Americans had suffered from a shortage of housing in the war years. After the war, they began to find new homes in the suburbs, made affordable by new approaches to building. The Levittowns, built by William J. Levitt with his brother Alfred, became symbols of suburbia. Levittown architecture dispensed with basements and built rows of nearly identical houses on concrete slabs. Other builders followed the success of the Levitts. By 1955, three quarters of all new housing in the United States consisted of subdivisions based on the Levittown model. Throughout the decade, 83 percent of all population growth in the United States occurred in the suburbs.

Identify which type of setting you live in (rural, urban, or suburban). Describe what makes where you live what it is.

Explain why "Levittowns" built rows of "nearly identical houses."

The automobile industry made the growth of the suburbs possible. Automobile sales during this decade broke all previous records. New road construction enabled people in the suburbs to travel daily from their homes to their jobs. When the U.S. Congress approved the interstate highway system in 1956, road construction became a national priority that fed the expanding suburbs.

Explain why the creations of the interstate high system helped suburban expansion.

Life in the suburbs contributed to a culture of conformity by placing Americans in similar homes that varied relatively little between regions or within subdivisions. In the suburban tract, it was difficult to find families that strayed from the nuclear model, one that held fairly well defined roles for each member and emphasized the enjoyment of material goods. The conformity of the suburban lifestyle was encouraged, further, by the patterns of family life and entertainment within suburban homes.

Explain how the growth of the suburbs helped to create a culture of conformity.

THE BABY BOOM AND CLASS CHANGE

In her books of the later twentieth century, sociologist Arlene Skolnick described the dream of the suburbs during the 1950's as a dream of a happy family life. Men and women began settling into family life in record numbers from the end of World War II until 1965. The three-- and four--child family became a widespread ideal, so much so that about 75 million babies were born in the United States during the two decades of the "baby boom (1945-1963)." Sociologists note that people who are caring for children tend to seek security and stability, rather than diversity and new ways of doing things. The baby boom therefore worked together with suburban uniformity to promote a culture of conformity during the 1950's.

Moreover, North Americans largely participated in a society with a rising middle class, the members of which enjoyed prosperity because they had jobs in offices and factories. This class change meant that the ability of American workers to provide for their families depended heavily on workers' conformity to the rules of the workplaces. It also meant that they saw their children's prospects for getting good jobs as dependent on their children's habits of conformity. The prosperity of the times and the experience of most adults with less prosperous times made parents inclined to encourage getting along with others and following the rules as essential traits to cultivate in children.

Explain how the "baby boom" led to the growth of the suburbs.

Explain what impact the Great Depression may have had on parenting during the 1950s.

MASS MEDIA AND CONFORMITY

Conformity in the home was further encouraged by the kinds of information and entertainment most 1950's homes received. North American manufacturers produced fewer than six thousand television sets in 1946. Seven years later, these manufacturers produced seven million sets. By the end of the 1950's, more than eight out of ten North American households owned televisions. These sets rapidly came to occupy central positions in American homes, and families commonly gathered in front of their small screens every evening.

Three major networks—NBC, ABC, and CBS—broadcast television programming, and there was relatively little variety in the programs watched by families across the American continent. One of the most popular types of shows was the family situation comedy. Set in the suburbs, such programs typically portrayed middle-class nuclear families that were idealized versions of those that actually lived in many places in North America. The programs left out many parts of American life. There were almost no low-income characters or minority characters on television in the 1950s (the exception was Cuban Desi Arnaz, the television and real-life husband of Lucille Ball on *I Love Lucy*). The fathers were generally not shown at work, and they never discussed their jobs at home. Nevertheless, shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* offered comfortable portrayals of family life that influenced popular notions of how life ought to be.

Explain one way in which television today does NOT encourage conformity.

THE COLD WAR

Political trends also had an impact on the predominant culture of conformity. After World War II, the United States and Canada began a period of competition with the Soviet Union, an ally of the North American countries during the war. During the late 1940's, many Americans began to fear that Soviet communism threatened them from inside their borders. This fear was compounded when former communists Elizabeth Bentley and Whittaker Chambers accused numerous U.S. government officials of being Soviet agents. In 1949, communist forces took over China, and the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb. A year later, U.S. citizens Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were accused of spying to help the Soviets acquire U.S. nuclear secrets.

Fear of communist subversion promoted conformity in thought and education. The U.S.

government established the “Zeal for Democracy” program in 1947. The purpose of the program was to help local school districts create anticommunist courses. Across the United States school officials began to look for ways to eliminate teachers who were suspected of being communist sympathizers. The National Education Association (NEA) made its position clear in 1949, when the association stated that communists should not be allowed to teach in public schools. Perhaps the best-known effort to identify and purge subversion during the decade was led by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, whose congressional hearings on communist sympathizers and influence led many critics to compare the era to that of the seventeenth century Salem witch-- hunts.

Popular entertainment was also affected by the Cold War. In 1947, the House Committee on Un--American Activities (HUAC) began investigating possible communist infiltration of the motion--picture industry. A number of prominent Hollywood figures were blacklisted, or banned from working in the industry, when they refused to cooperate with HUAC. Films and television programs often avoided controversial topics out of fear that they might be seen as contributing to the threat of communism. Many forms of popular entertainment expressed the fear of the communist threat either openly or symbolically. Mike Hammer, the hard--boiled detective hero of Mickey Spillane’s novels, killed communists. A number of films about alien invasions may well have appealed to viewers because the films expressed feelings that society was being taken over by alien forces. The most successful of these films, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), portrayed a small town being taken over by emotionless creatures, grown in pods, who took on the bodily forms of the town dwellers. One of the reasons this film might have had such appeal was that it could be taken equally well as representing fear of communist takeover or fear of the creeping culture of conformity.

Describe two ways in which Cold War tensions were portrayed in popular culture.

Describe one way in which modern tensions are portrayed in popular culture today.

IMPACT

The identification of a culture of conformity caused many North Americans both then and in later years to question their lives and the nature of their society. Many of the trends that helped to perpetuate this culture, especially the spread of the suburbs, continued. However, a period of reaction against the 1950’s American culture through self--conscious nonconformity also emerged, paving the way for countercultural upheavals of the 1960’s.

Many of the children who grew up during the 1950’s rebelled against the culture of their childhood during the 1960’s and 1970’s, giving rise to the counterculture. This rebellion probably had several roots during the 1950’s culture of conformity. For example, those who had spent

their early years in the prosperous 1950's often took material well-being for granted and tended to be less insecure than their parents, who had experienced the Great Depression and World War II. The U.S. generation of the baby boom also faced its own war, the Vietnam War. This was an extremely unpopular war, though, and it caused many young people to turn against their society. Rejection of convention was also a result of the fact that members of the baby-boom generation reached late adolescence and early adulthood during the 1960's and 1970's. This demographic meant that large numbers of people in North America were reaching the most rebellious times in their lives at that time.

Evaluate which of the six causes of cultural conformity was the most significant. Provide evidence both from the text and U.S. History to support your answer.