

The Other America

Not all Americans shared postwar middle-class affluence. Although most white Americans were barely conscious of poverty, it clearly existed in inner cities and rural areas. African-Americans, uprooted from rural rotos and transplanted into urban slums, were among the hardest hit. But members of other minority groups, as well as less fortunate whites, suffered similar dislocations, unknown to the middle class.

POVERTY AMID AFFLUENCE

Many people in the “affluent society” lived in poverty. Economic growth favored the upper and middle classes. Although the popular “trickle-down” theory argued that economic expansion benefitted all classes, little wealth, in fact, reached the citizens at the bottom. In 1950, according to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, a yearly subsistence-level income for a family of four was \$3000 and for a family of six was \$4000. The bureau reported that 40 million people (almost ¼ of the population) lived below those levels, with nearly the same number only marginally above the line. Two million migrant workers labored long hours for a subsistence wage. Many less mobile people were hardly better off. According to the 1960 census, 27% of the residential units in the U.S. were sub-standard.

Michael Harrington, socialist author and critic, shocked the country with his 1962 study *The Other America*. The poor, Harrington showed, were everywhere. He described New York City’s “economic underworld,” where Puerto Ricans and Negroes, alcoholics, drifters, and disturbed people” haunted employment agencies for temporary positions as “dishwashers and day workers, the fly-by-night jobs.” In the afternoon, he continued, “the jobs have all been handed out, yet the people still mill around. Some of them sit on benches in the larger offices. There is no real point to their waiting, yet they have nothing else to do.”

Harrington also described the conditions faced by the rural poor. Despite the prosperity that surrounded them, the mountain folk of Appalachia, the tenant farmers of Mississippi, and the migrant farmers of Florida, Texas, and California were all caught in poverty’s relentless cycle.

HARD TIMES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICANS

African-Americans were among the postwar nation’s least prosperous citizens. In the South, the agricultural decline of the early 20th century continued in the postwar era. As cotton farmers turned to less labor-intensive crops like soybeans and peanuts, they ousted their tenants, most of whom were African-Americans.

...Millions of blacks moved to southern cities, where they found better jobs, better schooling, and freedom from landlords. Some achieved middle class status; many more did not. They remained poor, with even less of a support system than they had known before.

Millions of African-American headed for the northern cities after 1940. In the 1950s, Detroit’s black population increased from 16 to 29% and Chicago’s went from 14 to 23%. The new arrivals congregated in urban slums, where the growth of social services failed to keep pace with population growth.

The black ghetto that had begun to develop earlier in the 20th century became a permanent fixture in the post-World War II years. African-Americans attempting to move elsewhere often found the way blocked. In 1951, a black couple purchasing a home in Cicero, Illinois, was driven away when an angry crowd broke the house’s windows, defaced the walls, and shouted vile insults. This pattern was repeated around the country - in Birmingham, Chicago, Detroit, and countless other cities.

Novelist and essayist James Baldwin described slum conditions and their corrosive effect on Americans blacks in his 1961 book *Nobody Knows My Name*:

They work in the white man’s world all day and come home in the evening to this fetid block. They struggle to instill in their children some private sense of honor or dignity, which will help the child to survive. This means, of course, that they must struggle, stolidly, incessantly, to keep this sense alive in themselves, in spite of the insults, the indifference, and the cruelty they are certain to encounter in their working day.

Most African-American remained second-class citizens. Escape from the slums was difficult for many and impossible for most. Persistent poverty remained a dismal fact of life.

LATINOS ON FRINGE

Latinos, like other groups, had similar difficulties in the postwar U.S.. Latino immigrants from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Central America, often unskilled and illiterate, followed other less fortunate Americans to the cities. The conditions they encountered there were similar to those faced by blacks.

Chicanos, or Mexican-Americans, were the most numerous of the newcomers and faced peculiar difficulties. During WWII, as the country experienced a labor shortage at home, American farmers sought Mexican braceros (helping hands) to harvest their crops. A program to encourage the seasonal immigration of farm workers continued after the war when the government signed a Migratory Labor Agreement with Mexico. Between 1948 and 1964, some 4.5 million Mexicans were brought to the U.S. for temporary work. Braceros were expected to return to Mexico at the end of their labor contract, but often they stayed. Joining them were millions more who entered the country illegally.

Conditions were harsh for the braceros in the best of times, but in periods of economic difficulty, troubles worsened. During a serious recession in 1953-1954, the government mounted Operation Wetback to deport illegal entrants and braceros who had remained in the country illegally and expelled 1.1 million. As immigration officials searched out illegal workers, all Chicanos found themselves vulnerable.

Operation Wetback did not end the reliance on poor Mexican farm laborers. A coalition of southern Democrats and conservative Republicans, mostly representing farm states, extended the Migratory Labor Agreement with Mexico, for the legislators wanted to continue to take advantage of the cheap labor. Two years after the massive deportation of 1954, a record 445,000 braceros crossed the border.

Puerto Ricans were numerous in other parts of the country. A steady stream of immigrants had been coming to New York from Puerto Rico since the 1920s. By the end of the 1960s, New York City has more Puerto Ricans than San Juan, the island's capital. Puerto Ricans, like many other immigrants, hoped to earn money in America and then return home. Some did; others stayed. Like countless Latinos, most failed to enjoy the promise of the American dream.

ASIAN-AMERICAN ADVANCES

For Asian-Americans, conditions improved somewhat in the aftermath of WWII. Japanese-Americans, ravaged by their devastating internment during the war, fought back after the struggle. In 1948, the Supreme Court, noting that [a wartime law confiscating Japanese-American property] was "nothing more than outright racial discrimination," declared it unconstitutional.

In 1952, the Immigration and Nationality Act eased immigration quotas... it removed the longstanding ban on Japanese immigration and made first-generation Japanese immigrants eligible for citizenship. It also established a quota of 100 immigrants a year from each Asian country. While that number was tiny compared to those admitted annually from northern and western Europe, the measure was a first step in ending the discriminatory exclusion of the past.

By the 1950s, many second generation Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans had moved into white-collar work. Promoting education for their children, they became part of the growing middle class, hoping like others to enjoy the benefits of the American dream.

CONCLUSION

In general, the U.S. during the decade and a half after WWII was stable and secure. Recessions occurred periodically, but the economy righted itself after short downturns. For the most part, business boomed. The standard of living for many of the nation's citizens reached new heights, especially compared with standards in other parts of the world. Millions of middle-class Americans joined the ranks of suburban property owners, enjoying the benefits of shopping centers, fast-food establishments, and other material manifestations of what they considered the good life. Workers found themselves savoring the materialistic advantages of the era. The political world reflected prosperous times.

Some Americans did not share in the prosperity, but they were not visible in the affluent suburbs. Many African-Americans and members of other minority groups were seriously disadvantaged, although they still believed they could share in the American dream and remained confident that deeply rooted patterns of discrimination could be changed. Even when they began to mobilize, their protest was peaceful at first.