

Possible Topics for 11th Grade Cultural History Lesson Study

I. Cultural imperialism: the global transmission of American popular culture in the 20th century

From jazz, rock and roll, and Hollywood, to McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and the English language itself, American culture has been steadily making its way across the globe since the turn of the twentieth century. While some argue that this exportation of American culture abroad is an inevitable effect of America's expanding leadership in a globalized economy over the course of the 20th century, or that what began as American popular culture has become more of a shared world culture, others argue that in some instances, the transmission of American culture to other parts of the world has been cultural colonialism. What meaning has this process taken on in different parts of the world at different historical moments?

Historical questions:

- What impact has the transmission of American culture abroad had on American diplomacy and vice versa?
- How has the exportation of American culture affected the how America and Americans are perceived around the world at different historical moments?
- How has the exportation of American culture affected (and how does it reflect) how Americans have perceived others in other parts of the world and immigrants in the United States at particular historical moments?
- What have been some unintended consequences of this process?
- To what extent is the term "cultural imperialism" accurate?

Possible examples and sources:

- Hawaii or the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century: commentary, fiction, and poetry about American imperialism; cartoons and artwork depicting Filipinos; local accounts of American cultural forms replacing Filipino and Hawaiian culture and tradition (especially in terms of religion and race)
- Latin America: American consumerism (newspaper and magazine advertisements for American goods); baseball or American tourism in pre-revolution Cuba; United Fruit Company towns
- The Cold War: films and print material from the U.S. Information Agency; images of American culture abroad (Coca-Cola behind the iron curtain, rock concerts, etc.); the "kitchen debate"

II. The culture of modernity: Taylorism, Fordism, and being a cog in a machine

The growth of industry, scientific management (or "Taylorism"), and the introduction of assembly lines ("Fordism") affected much more than the economy in the early 20th century. It altered Americans' (and especially American men's) relationships with their bosses, their employees, and their coworkers, and changed the experience and meaning of labor.

Historical questions:

- How did the introduction of assembly lines and scientific management change the experience and meaning of labor in the early 20th century?
- How did workers respond to their new roles as cogs in machines?
- How did factory work change relationships among workers and between bosses and employees?

Possible sources:

- *Modern Times* with Charlie Chaplin
- Excerpts from theories of scientific management (intellectual history)
- Images, pamphlets, newspaper articles reflecting workers' complaints about being managed like animals and not like people
- Films and photographs of assembly lines

III. Religion as a cultural battleground: the Scopes trial

The Scopes Trial, the 1925 court case against biology teacher John Scopes for illegally teaching evolution in public high school in Tennessee, is often seen as a battle between secular modernity and religious backwardness. During the case, in fact, the media and the defense attorney Clarence Darrow worked to cultivate that representation, which became especially apparent in Darrow's interrogation of prosecutor William Jennings Bryan and in H.L. Mencken's coverage of the case for the *Baltimore Sun*. This case provides an excellent window for understanding the importance of religion and science in American culture and the representations of both science and religious fundamentalism in this period.

Historical questions:

- Why was this case called the "trial of the century"? Why were so many people so interested in it at the time?
- How were science and evolution represented in the case and in the media? How were creationism and religion represented?
- What role did the media have in the meaning of the Scopes Trial?

Possible sources:

- a selection of H.L. Mencken's articles
- excerpts from trial transcripts (especially text of Darrow's examination of Bryan and Bryan's testimony)
- a selection of other newspaper articles and headlines, especially representing different regional views and perspectives
- cartoons
- *Inherit the Wind* or another more contemporary film or television version of the trial (CAUTION: potential for misrepresenting what actually happened)

IV. Culture and Jim Crow: African-American letters, poetry, art, and music from the North and the South during the first Great Migration

While black cultural expression in the 1920s is usually taught through the Harlem Renaissance, there was a vast amount of black cultural production beyond Harlem, including among the millions of blacks who remained trapped in the South by Jim Crow during the period of the first large black migration from the South during and after World War I. Blues music is one of the most expressive representations of Jim Crow oppression from the South in this period, but one can also draw conclusions about black thought and culture in this period from looking at Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and also expanding black urban communities in southern cities like Atlanta, Richmond, and Baltimore.

Historical questions:

- How did cultural representations of both life in the South under Jim Crow and the "promised land" of the North contribute to the Great Migration?
- To what extent did blacks use cultural and artistic forms as means of protest?

- How did black art and music in this period influence American culture more generally?
- What kinds of theories and strategies for racial progress did black intellectuals advance in this period and what were the debates these different theories engendered among African Americans?
- How was black urban culture (in both the North and the South) different from and similar to the rural southern culture migrants left behind? What challenges did blacks face upon arriving in new places and how did they face them? How did migrants build and foster community?

Possible sources:

- Blues music and lyrics (Robert Johnson, for example)
- Articles, ads, and letters in the *Chicago Defender*
- Ads and articles in other black papers, like the *Pittsburgh Courier* or *Cleveland Gazette*
- Photos of Chicago's "black belt"
- Photos of migrants
- Harlem Renaissance classics like Langston Hughes poetry, footage and photos from the Apollo Theater, art by Jacob Lawrence
- Intellectual history of New Negro movement, with readings from Alain Locke, etc.
- WPA narratives of southern blacks during the Great Depression

V. Consumer culture: cars, kitchens, and picket fences in post-WWII America

In the "affluent society" of post-WWII America, as millions of Americans purchased single-family homes in the suburbs, they also suddenly began purchasing vast amounts of consumer goods like cars, appliances, radios and televisions, clothing, and TV dinners. Advertisers and the U.S. government helped fuel the notion that spending and consuming were central to being American and were important demonstrations of American democratic values. Of course, the culture of consumption, while stimulating the postwar economy, also had deleterious racial, class, and gender implications.

Historical questions:

- What is "consumer culture"?
- What values were promulgated by postwar consumer culture?
- What were some of the racial, class, and gender implications of the kinds of consumption that was encouraged in this period?

Possible sources:

- Ads (especially ads from women's magazines and television ads)
- **The "kitchen debate"
- Photos and models of Levittowns
- Barbies

**This topic can also be linked to cultural imperialism by exploring the impact of American consumer culture on the Cold War.

VI. A culture of fear: depictions of nuclear war and Soviet espionage during the Cold War

The images of the dark, billowing nuclear mushroom clouds and Soviet spies were pervasive in American film, television, and fiction during the Cold War. In addition, the U.S. government, through the U.S. Information Agency and the C.I.A., and the Soviet government engaged in a massive cultural and ideological war that resulted in one of the most prolific periods of propaganda

production in world history. Many historians argue, in fact, that ideology and culture were nearly as important as diplomacy and politics during the Cold War.

Historical questions:

- What kinds of cultural representations of America and the Soviet Union create of one another and of themselves?
- What role did propaganda play in the fighting and outcome of the Cold War?

Possible sources:

- Propaganda printed in the U.S. and abroad depicting virtuosity of American values and capitalism and evilness of communism and Soviets
- Any number of movies or television shows from the period
- HUAC and Hollywood
- LBJ's "Daisy" ad in the 1964 election campaign against Barry Goldwater
- "the miracle on ice": the Olympics and sports during the Cold War

VII. Protest culture: folk music during the Vietnam War

As the first war that Americans watched on television, the Vietnam War penetrated American culture and consciousness as no previous war had. Opposition to the war was, of course, vehement and widespread and some of the most eloquent protest came in the form of music. The cultural expression of anti-war sentiment, especially by American youth through music and concerts, both fueled and was fueled by a protest culture with profound political and cultural consequences.

Historical questions:

- What were some of the characteristic sentiments of these protest songs and of 1960s youth culture?
- What effects did film and the media have on the protest movement?
- How did these songs and the movement they came out of affect U.S. involvement in Vietnam and American politics more generally?
- How were women, minorities, and the working class involved and represented in these movements?

Possible sources:

- songs and song lyrics from artists like Woody and Arlo Guthrie, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs
- video and images from Woodstock and other concerts

More ideas:

- Prohibition: the culture of temperance and the cultural significance of alcohol
- Experiencing the Great Depression: Farm Security Administration photos, letters to FDR, and public art
- Solidarity: labor unions and working-class culture
- Rap, hip-hop, and urban culture in the '80s
- Evangelicalism and Megachurches
- Immigration: Chinatowns, Koreatowns, Japantowns, Little Italies, Little Ethiopias, Little Saigons and assimilation