Bryn Mawr College, Emily Balch Seminar

Poverty, Affluence, and American Culture

Quick Reference – U.S. Time Periods and Historical Phases

A very brief and incomplete overview of some major colonial and U.S. time periods

1619-1865: Slavery is legal in all or parts of the colonies and the country, until the close of the Civil War (1861-65). Agriculture plays a major role in the work lives of most people. Manufacturing is mostly small-scale and relies mainly on human, animal, and water power, but this starts to change towards the end of this period (see below).

1810s-1840s: First wave of U.S. industrialization. U.S. becomes second industrialized nation (after Great Britain). Steam engines and textile production (the latter depending largely on enslaved labor) are the main drivers.

1850s-early 1900s: Practical, economical method of large-scale steel production drives second wave of U.S. industrialization. Huge factories, rapidly growing cities, railroads, and waves of millions of immigrants, mostly from Ireland, eastern and southern Europe, and China.

1785-1944: U.S. passes laws allowing people to purchase land cheaply (1785), claim land for free if they improve it (1862), get support in old age (1935), and get guaranteed home mortgage loans and free college educations if they served in the military (1944). Slavery and systemic discrimination generally prevent Black Americans from participating in these opportunities.

1929-1941; 1941-45; 1950-1973: Great Depression, followed by World War II, and then postwar US economic boom.

1910-1970: Great Migration – about six million Black Americans move from the South to Northern, Midwestern, and western cities fleeing rigid segregation and racist violence and seeking economic opportunity.

1950s-1990s: Large-scale suburbanization and “white flight”: millions of Americans, mostly working and middle-class white people, move from cities to newly created suburbs.

1970s-present: Much U.S. manufacturing moves from Northeastern, Midwestern, and western cities to suburbs, then to South and Southwest, then overseas. Financial and other “white collar” industries, and the service industry, become dominant. Wealth and income inequality widens.