

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
Department of History
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History 626

American Social History, 1860-Present

John Sharpless

ABOUT THE MID-TERM AND FINAL EXAMINATIONS

To avoid misunderstanding over the goals and direction of the course, I have made it a practice to distribute the questions for both the mid-terms and final examinations in advance. In each case, the questions which will appear on the examination will be taken from the list of questions provided below.

- I. The questions on the first mid-term examination (March) will be taken from the following:
 - A. America can be described as a nation of movers. This was no less true in the nineteenth century than it is now. However, moving from one place to another took its toll on family life. Discuss the consequences of migration for family structure in the nineteenth century.
 - B. By 1900 it was apparent to most Americans that changes in technology and the character of the economy had altered basic social institutions. Foremost in people's minds were the changes in "family life," however, many other aspects of daily life (such as religion, schooling and work) were altered as well. Drawing on material provided in this course outline and analyze the major changes of the character of the family between the 1860's and 1900. Provide specific examples to illustrate your discussion. Attempt to identify why these changes came about.
 - C. "Economy determines the options available, cultural preference determines the alternative chosen." Choose four of the following groups of Americans; discuss the ways in which the changing structure of the American economy set limits to their social and economic (collective) behavior. Note the extent to which the economic system served to make the situation better or worse. Limit your discussion to the period 1860-1915.
 - Immigrants in cities
 - Blacks in the rural South
 - Middle-class Americans
 - Native Americans [American Indians]
 - Midwestern farmers
 - White working class Americans
 - D. Among the many dimensions that serve to classify people, age serves as an important demarcation. However, the attitudes we have held toward the process of "growing up and growing old" have changed with time. Write a short essay in which you discuss the basic changes in the nineteenth century. Note any important variations by sex or class.
 - E. Scholars have defined "urbanization" in various ways. Give your own definition; what demographic, societal, environmental, and technological factors help us account for urbanization in America from 1860 to 1900? Which factors do you consider most important?

- II. The second mid-term will take the form of a short essay. The essays should not exceed eight (8) typed pages. The problem will be researched and the essay will be written outside of class. However, these are not to be considered cooperative ventures. Indeed, any evidence that your essay was not totally the result of independent effort will result in a failing grade.

THE MID-TERM ESSAYS ARE DUE IN CLASS (LECTURE HOUR) ON OR ABOUT APRIL 17TH. NO EXTENSION WILL BE ALLOWED. LATE PAPERS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

THE PROBLEM

It was once very popular among American historians to speak of an "American experience." (For reasons which will become clear in the course of the semester, this view has fallen into disfavor.) They were not making the claim that all Americans were (or are) alike. Presumably, they meant that most Americans in the past and present share an essential core of common experience, culture and ideology which binds them together and separates them from other "national types." While this "core experience" has changed over time, it is something that natives and immigrants, blacks and whites, old and young, northerners and southerners could all identify as part of their lives.

Whether this "core experience" exists or ever existed is a matter of considerable debate. Drawing on the materials presented in this course, you are to address this problem.

Attempt, first, to define as best you can what the "core of common experience" might have been (your definition should focus on the period 1876-1929). Then attempt to answer the following kinds of questions (this is not an exhaustive list):

In general,

- What kinds of economic and social forces tend to encourage or retard the development of a common national experience or belief system?
- Were there factors in this particular period of time that affected this process?
- To what extent and in what ways do you think the development of a common social experience occurred in this period?
- Were there groups that resisted this process? How? Was it by choice or chance?
- Finally, what kinds of effects did this kind of national socializing process have on particular individuals?

Write a well organized essay developing your ideas on this subject. Provide support for your view with logic and evidence.

- III. The questions which will appear on the final exam will be taken from the following:
- A. A near-famous historian once said, "Traumatic episodes like depression and war decisively mark the character of the people who live through them." Analyze this statement by examining the generation which reached maturity in the depression years of the 1930's and went to war in the 1940's. Your answer must consider:

- 1) The formative impact of the Depression and World War II.
- 2) The possible effects of the Depression and World War II on social and economic behavior in the 1950's and 1960's.
- 3) The challenge of the 1960's of a new generation to this dominant group.

Provide illustrations for your essay from the lectures, readings and discussion sections.

- B. A noted social critic has observed that Hollywood movies inevitably reflect what Americans want to believe about themselves, their values, and their society. Do you agree or disagree with this viewpoint? Select at least three movies shown in this course and evaluate their presentation of the reality of American society in the 1930's and the early 1940's.
- C. A famous historian has written that a basic trend in American society over the past 100 years has been the triumph of organization over individualism. Assess the accuracy of this statement by concentrating on three of the following: farmers; urban laborers; liberal reformers; businessmen; and, women. Support your generalizations with specific evidence.
- D. "American society," said a close friend of a near-famous historian, "is an enormous puzzle. We are, as never before, morally unfettered yet socially and economically alienated and enslaved."

Discuss this statement for the period 1930-1980 in terms of five (5) of the following seven (7) aspects of community change:

- 1) Division of labor;
 - 2) Differentiation of Interests and Association;
 - 3) Increasing systematic relationships to larger society;
 - 4) Bureaucratization and impersonalization;
 - 5) Transfer of personal and family functions to profit enterprise and government;
 - 6) Reorganization of Spatial Relationships;
 - 7) Change in personal and community value systems.
- E. "Economy determines the options available, cultural preference determines the alternative chosen." Choose four of the following groups of Americans; discuss the ways in which the changing structure of the American economy set limits to their social and political (collective) behavior. Note the extent to which the political system served to make the situation better or worse. Limit your discussion to the period 1945-1980.

- Blacks in the urban areas
- Middle-class Americans in suburbs
- Native Americans [American Indians]
- Midwestern farmers and their families
- White working class Americans

(Suggestions: Define your terms carefully.)