

American Affluence | A1 Sample Answer

What was the 'American Dream' and how was it fulfilled in the 1950s? (2015 Topic 6 Q3)

Post War American Society was marked by dramatic growth and change. There was unprecedented growth in affluence, prosperity and population, especially when compared to the destruction of Europe. The lives of ordinary people were transformed by this changed society and the American Dream of consumerism, conformity and contentment was available for all middle class, white American families. This prosperity transformed the fifties into the highlight years of the great American society and the fifties supported affluence throughout Middle America.

After the war, the national birth rate shot up. This baby boom was helped by young marriages in the war years and soldiers returning home. Birth rates continued to rise well into the 1950s. From 1948-1953, more babies were born than in the previous thirty years. This meant that women tended to leave the workplace once married and stay at home, having bigger families than they might have had previously. It also stimulated a demand for a range of consumer goods and services. By 1958, children under 15 made up nearly one third of the population and provided a market for clothes, food and toys. Toy sales in 1958 reached nearly 1.25 billion dollars. These children later grew up to contribute to the teen youth culture of the sixties that was also part of American life.

These large families and young marriages created a demand for houses, suburban development, schools, recreational and sports facilities. Levitt and sons saw a market in this. They decided to build housing settlements on the outskirts of cities, calling them Levittowns in 1951. These towns not only contained thousands of houses around America but they would also have all the facilities a middle class American family needed. The motto was that no child would have to walk miles across major roads to get to school so hundreds of new schools were built. Parks, little league parks, swimming pools and other areas designated to popular recreational activities were commonplace also. The area would also be completely safe for children. The houses were all similarly built, all looking the same to conform to the common American neighbourhood ideal. Unlike other houses being built at the time, these houses were already kitted out with all the necessary appliances such as fridges, washing machines and cookers to make a housewife's job

easier. The houses were built extremely fast, up to fifty being built a day. The new American 'suburbia' was a refreshing break from city life, prompting many families to migrate out from the cities. The idea of a happy, suburban family life was the American dream for many people and was expected to be the American dream for all married women.

The American way of life was also facilitated by the growth of the consumer society. During the war, people were poor and didn't have much disposable income. There was also not much to spend any money they did have on so they tended to save it instead of spend it. The economic boom in the post war years left people considerably better off. People wanted to use their newfound wealth to buy things that weren't even on the market before. They wanted to give their children luxuries that they previously could never afford. This meant they needed new goods to buy. There were major advancements in technology and devices for consumer purchase. These included cameras, kitchen appliances such as washing machines, televisions, radios and other gadget. Companies such as Kodak flourished. All these advancements made people's lives easier which left them with more leisure time to use even more consumer goods. Car culture also boomed with 130 million cars on the roads. There was one car for every three Americans compared to one for ten in Britain. American cars ran on a bigger is better and style over substance motto with fancy gas guzzlers being poorly made but mass produced. The Cadillac was a status symbol. Many things in society became centered around cars such as drive in restaurants, banks and cinemas. General Motors also fed into this society by introducing the first credit card. These were introduced in the fifties so people could buy now and pay later. This period of affluence and consumerism was criticised but was also vital for the American Dream to grow during the fifties.

Television also played a huge role in impacting American lives. It was one of the most dominant aspects of consumer society. TVs became essential for every home and all but replaced going to the cinema. Very few families sought entertainment outside of their own living rooms. Although coloured TV wasn't invented until 1972, by the end of the 1950s 90% of households owned a black and white television set. Many short soaps were shown for housewives during the day, often sponsored by detergents which they were named after, and longer shows became family bonding time. Advertisements easily dominated the television with commercials making up two minutes of every ten minutes of air time. Where families used to eat dinner in the dining room or go to the cinema, it became popular to eat in front of the television instead. By 1960, 50% of children said TV was their favourite hobby.

The American Dream of the 1950s has faced criticism throughout history. Many people pin the mass consumerism of the time as greed that became impossible to maintain in the economic crash of the seventies. The chauvinism of the expectations of middle class housewives came under fire in the feminist movement of the following years. The growth of media influence and the impact of McCarthyism was seen as the foundations of the later media centric society and seemed to breed conformity. However, be it positive or negative, the American Dream most certainly shaped America of the 1950s.