

The Affluent Fifties: Suburbia, Consumerism, and the Liberal Consensus

- I. Welcome to Levittown...
 - a. Built in
 - i. New York
 - ii. New Jersey
 - iii. Philadelphia
 - b. Assembly-line neighborhoods
 - i. Houses equipped with the latest appliances
 - c. 800,000 people bought houses
- II. Economic Growth in the 1950s and beyond
 - a. GNP doubles
 - b. Growth: the backdrop for US history 1950-70s
 - c. What made all this growth happen?
 - i. Cold War military spending
 - 1. the creation of “military-industrial complex”
 - a. 10-15% of entire economy
 - 2. the Interstate Highway System
 - a. Federal Highway Act of 1956
 - ii. Deliberate government policy
 - 1. the continuing influence of the New Deal idea of “activist government,”
 - a. i.e. “liberalism”
 - 2. 1950s = “corporate liberalism”: anti-communist, corporate-friendly
 - 3. The “Liberal Consensus” = the bipartisan popularity of moderate, corporate liberalism in the 1950s and 60s
 - a. Example: Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy
- III. 1950s Corporate Liberalism in Action
 - a. Highway construction and Federally-backed mortgages

- i. Goal=stimulate housing industry, automobile industry, and thus much of the economy, resulting in better wages and more consumer spending
 - ii. Mortgages and racial discrimination
 - 1. Federal Housing Authority (FHA)
 - 2. Suburbs almost all white
 - 3. Restrictive covenant kept people from selling their houses to African Americans
- IV. "Hyperconsumerism"
 - a. Credit cards and TV commercials
 - b. Consumerism as "Freedom"
 - i. The "Kitchen Debate" (Moscow; 1959)
 - 1. Showing the soviets a modern American kitchen
 - 2. Nixon and Khrushchev have a debate about the usefulness of the appliances
- V. Cultural Critics of Corporations, Consumerism and Suburbia
 - a. Sloan Wilson, *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955)
 - b. C. Wright Mill, *White Collar* (1951)
 - c. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (1951)
 - d. William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (1956)
 - e. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)