

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN SOCIAL HISTORY

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PART I : SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Overview In theory, the American experiment has been a democratic one and class hierarchies were eliminated. In reality, there have been many differences in class and clear hierarchies, which have less to do with position in a church or family alliances and more to do with race, profession, length of time in the U.S., and access to capital.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): The Clovis culture was not as stratified as other cultures, but it did have clear class distinctions. Based on archeological findings and artwork in petroglyphs, cave paintings and geoglyphes, there were several classes, which included warriors, hunters, and that of shaman and religious leader.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC):

The ruling class was that of the religious leader and the medicine men (shaman class). There were also hunters and those who took care of the crops and the harvest. Women stayed in the camps and did not participate as active medicine men or women, but they were considered to have power due to matrilineage

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD):

Society was organized around matriarchies, which were convenient for lineage and family alliances but they were not used for land ownership since all land was owned communally. The leader of the nation or group was also a religious leader. High status was also accorded warriors and hunters.

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):

In many ways, the Mississippi Culture was similar to that of the Maya and the Aztec. There were kings, princes, and princesses who were part of a royal family. They participated in religious rites and had important roles. However, the role of High Priest was an important one, and it was independent of the royal family. The priests were a very high ranking. In addition, there were individual citizens, warriors, and craftsmen.

Colonial (Early Modern)

English Colonies: Many of the inhabitants of the English colonies came to America to escape religious and political persecution or to pursue economic opportunities. Most would have been considered middle class but there were many who were considered landed gentry, even as there were many who simply wanted to try make their fortune in the New Land.

Religious dissenters: Perhaps the most cohesive group were the religious dissenters. They were middle class and tended to be free thinkers who educated their children at home. They included Puritans, Pilgrims, Quakers, and other independent groups.

Younger sons of the landed gentry with charters from the Crown: Younger sons who would not inherit the land in their families (thanks to entailed estates) often emigrated to America to make their fortune. They were often given charters from the Crown, which was essentially a permit to explore, stake, and claim any land that was not yet claimed by the Crown. This approach was encouraged because it set up a rivalry with the French, who were doing everything they could to win the “land grab.”

Indentured servants: Young men and boys from poorer classes did not have the funds to sail to America. So, their families helped them find position as apprentices to a tradesman in America. After a certain number of years of working and being trained in the profession, the contract was satisfied and the individual received his freedom again.

Mercenary soldiers: Prussian soldiers were extremely disciplined and skillful, and they trained the American Continental Army. Motivated by rancor toward England as well as funds from France, the Prussians were considered to be in the military class, and as such, the officers tended to be from nobility.

Slaves: Most slaves were descended from individuals who had been kidnapped and sold from their homes in West Africa. As slaves, and literally the property of another person, they occupied the lowest level of the social hierarchy. They could not own land, vote, have freedom of movement, and were often abused and treated worse than animals.

African freedmen: There were Africans and African Americans who were free, but they were few and far between. There were some freed slaves who came from the Caribbean who were of mixed race.

Dutch Colonies:

Entrepreneurs: The great majority of Dutch colonists were entrepreneurs and businessmen, often setting up financing for commerce and trade. Their centers were along the Hudson River, with large settlements in New Amsterdam, now known as New York. There were also settlements near Albany in Voorheesville and Fort Orange.

Religious dissenters: Protestants who had been persecuted in France and in England often moved to the Holland. When they had the opportunity to move to America and set up colonies and potentially thrive, they happily did so. They were largely middle class and agrarian.

Spanish Colonies:

Peninsulares: The Peninsulares were those from the Iberian Peninsula and they were at the top of the social hierarchy. They occupied positions of responsibility and trust for the Spanish crown.

Criollos: Criollos were considered “White” because they were descended from Peninsulares. They occupied, with the Peninsulares, the highest rungs of the social order.

Mestizos: Criollos who had children with the indigenous peoples were called “mestizos” and they soon became the most populous social class in the Spanish-controlled part of North America.

Indios: Unfortunately, the indigenous peoples had virtually no rights and were barred from owning land. They lived in tremendous poverty and misery.

French Colonies:

Catholics and priests: The Catholic clergy occupied positions of authority in the French colonies.

French governmental officials and appointees: The representatives of the French monarchy occupied the highest levels of society and were able to make administrative and judicial decisions that affected the lives of all who lived in the French adjudicated areas.

Indians / mixed race: The Indians and mixed-race peoples were consigned to the destiny of all conquered peoples, which is to say that they had almost no status at all in the colonies.

Fur traders and explorers: They were important to the French monarchy and were often well-funded because their ability to explore and claim land for the French crown was vital to the health of the colonies.

Nineteenth Century

Aristocrats: In theory, America was founded to correct the ills of monarchies and aristocracies. In reality, the wealthy planters, bankers, businessmen, and industrialists were America's aristocracy and they dominated both commerce and the governance.

Whites of Northern European Descent: People of European descent occupied the highest class. Within the whites, the social differentiation usually had to do with wealth. Women did not have the right to vote, and they had limited self-determination and financial authority.

African-American: There was no question that African Americans were relegated to the class and were essentially disenfranchised for most of the 19th century, even after slavery was abolished. To open up opportunities and to combat racism and disenfranchisement, African American leaders established businesses, churches, and universities.

Creole: The descendants from the original French settlers who lived in the French-settled territories were in the upper classes. They lived in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and the Mississippi Valley.

Indians: Indians were attacked, persecuted, targeted for extermination, feared and forcibly removed to unwanted territories. They occupied a pariah class.

Immigrants: Southern European immigrants settled in New York and along the East Coast. They were subjected to a great deal of prejudice, as were the Irish, principally because they were Catholic and they often arrived in an impoverished financial state.

Central and Eastern Europeans: The immigrants who came from Central and Eastern Europe were usually either Jewish or they were farmers seeking refuge from the endless wars. The farmers settled in the Great Plains where they established wheat farms and ranches. They became important entrepreneurs and industrialists with the advent of the railroads.

Chinese (labor force for railroad construction): Workers from China came voluntarily or were kidnapped to work in the construction of the railroads in the western states. They were treated quite badly, often because of the vast cultural differences between a European-based culture, as well as challenging language differences. They occupied a level of society that was, at least at first, very low. Later, Chinese became successful entrepreneurs and educators.

Women: During the nineteenth century, women were nominally revered and placed on pedestals as mothers and symbols of virtue. However, they had very little political or economic self-determination.

Twentieth Century

Robber Baron: Often monopolists, the robber barons manipulated the laws and the banking structures to acquire controlling interests in major industries and in natural resources. They later often donated money to philanthropic causes.

Professional class: Occupying a high rung in society, the college-educated professionals (doctors, lawyers, educators, accountants) often owned businesses as well. They were considered aspirational with an ability to move up in social scale.

Middle class: For many years, the middle class was the most upwardly mobile class, and it was possible to achieve that standing by means of education, thrift (savings and investment), and entrepreneurship.

Factory worker / union: The working classes gained a boost with the formation of unions, and the protections afforded the union workers. They were able to have better health, work shorter hours, and have better wages. Toward the end of the century, the unions were under attack for corruption and for contributing to costs that made the end products unable to successfully compete in the world marketplace.

Entrepreneurs: Successful entrepreneurs are able to catapult themselves into the highest rungs of society, particularly when their business acumen is coupled with technological breakthroughs such as the telephone, television, computer, airplanes, automobiles, etc.

Women: Women's standing in society dramatically changed in the 20th century as rights and privileges that were accorded men such as the right to vote, work outside the home, own property, and more, were installed.

Civil Rights Movement: African Americans, who had lost the right to vote, were re-enfranchised in 1964. Since that time, great improvements have been made, but still there are problems and racism exists in American society.

Poor / underclass: Despite the successes of people who have achieved the American Dream, and the possibility of upward mobility, poverty still exists in America. Persistent pockets of poverty exist in rural America, in mountainous coal-mining Appalachia, in old industrial centers (Detroit), in locations isolated from commerce and industry. There are also the poor in urban areas who are homeless or almost homeless, living a precarious existence in the shadows of society in homeless shelters, abandoned buildings, low-cost motels. Many of the poor are unwed mothers, their children, drug addicts, and formerly incarcerated males. Others are the working poor, who find they cannot subsist on the scanty hours and minimum wage of restaurants, etc.

Discussion/Questions

1. Religious leaders were an important part of North American civilizations, and they often occupied the top rungs of society. Please reflect on the beliefs held by the early civilizations and explain why the religious leaders might be accorded such a high rung in society.
2. The groups who emigrated to North America came from different backgrounds and they had different goals and purposes for coming. Many came to find their fortunes, while others sought to escape persecutions. Others were kidnapped and forced into slavery. Select four or five groups and discuss the degree of opportunity that coming to North America might have offered them.
3. In the nineteenth century, expansion of the American frontier, the push toward the Pacific, and also the development of technology contributed to opportunities for upward social mobility. Describe the groups that might have benefited most from technology and westward expansion. Identify the groups and classes that might lose standing during that time and explain why.
4. In the twentieth-century, social mobility became more fluid with the advent of unions, the Civil Rights movement, the GI Bill and subsidized college educations, and the availability of entrepreneurial capital and investment. Describe the groups that had the most dramatic positive change in the 20th century.

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PART II : GENDER RELATIONS

Overview Gender roles are social constructs and so it should not be very surprising that they change over time, and also that there may be multiple ideas of what men and women do in society. There is a clear relationship between religion and gender roles, and when societies develop into industrial nations and later into ones that have strong media presences, there are often more opportunities for self-actualization and invention of gender to the point that there is a convergence of fantasy and reality.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): Based on the nature of the artifacts, it is clear that there were clear roles, which had to do with hunter, fisherman, process or captured prey, and then later of religious or shamanistic ceremonies. It's not clear if there were true gender differentiations, although we tend to think of men as hunters and women as the guardians of hearth and home.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): Gender ambiguity is the dominant characteristic of the pre-colonial Pueblo civilization. The gender-neutral Kokopeli and the trickster were perhaps the most defining element. The rites and rituals related to rain, moon phases, and corn were not necessarily gendered.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1500 AD): Women were important in the Eastern Woodland tribal cultures because they provided clear evidence of genealogy, particularly in a culture that did not necessarily recognize monogamy. The matriarchal culture allowed an understanding of family relationships, but it did not mean that the women held all the power. In fact, men also held positions of power; they just did not preside as head person in a family.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Puritan Gender Roles: Patriarchal, with man as head of household. Women considered the heads of home-making and child-rearing. Fear of women breaking out of traditional roles as evidenced by witchcraft ..

Planter / Plantation Gender Roles: Much depended on social status. Plantation owners: lord / lady equivalents. Servants similar to England. Sharecroppers and poor planters: shared roles (farming, etc.). Slaves – depended if field workers or house workers. Field: no gender roles – all worked alike. In the house, women in kitchen and cleaning, men in labor / repair roles. Taking care of animals.

Pioneer Gender Roles: Long absences from home (hunting, employment as guides, trading trips, going back East, etc.) resulted in a great deal of independence for women. Women home-schooled as well as maintained house and farm. They trained the children to be part of the home labor force; children were important for farm labor. Unpaid.

Native American Kidnapping: There were unusual gender risks in colonial times in the form of kidnappings of girls and young women by Native American tribes. Child kidnappings happened primarily in the northern part of the U.S. during the seven-year French Indian war in the 1750s. The most publicized, Mary Jemison, was kidnapped near the Pennsylvania / New York border, and she wrote an autobiographical account. She, like many others, chose the Indian way rather than to return. Now, we may think of it as Stockholm Syndrome, but others viewed it as a genuine preference for the Indian philosophy and way of life.

Revolutionary War Gender Roles: Young soldiers, often as young as 12 years of age. Andrew Jackson was such a young boy forced into the armed conflict when British soldiers attacked his home and killed his mother and father in front of him. Women played important support roles, such as laundry, uniform repair, and more.

Shakers: celibate with gender apartheid (although visiting a preservation garden in the Shaker village near Albany, New York revealed many medicinal herbs targeted to induce miscarriages (!))

Nineteenth Century

Utopian Communities: Free love / open marriages. Nashoba, founded by Frances Wright in 1825 in Tennessee was an abolitionist, free-love community. Oneida, by John Noyes, was established in Oneida, New York, in 1848. The Free Lovers ad Davis House, was established by Francis Barry in 1854 in Ohio.

Westward Expansion: Men as explorers and artists – solitary travelers. Women supported in towns; Native women were often cultural bridges = Sacajawea (guide for Lewis and Clark). Roles were ambiguous, and accomplishments were admired, especially as they related to survival in the tough frontier, and it made little difference if one were a man or a woman.

Women in the Frontier: Teachers, farmers, small business owners The freedom afforded women in the frontier was clear in situations where survival was a key concern, and in situations where women had both financial and physical freedom to participate and contribute as equals. In some situations, the American West was the most gender-equitable place on Planet Earth as individuals had to team together to survive, regardless of their sex. However, when circumstances were not so dire, and there was more discretionary income and potential, then typical gender relations prevailed and men dominated women.

Women Entrepreneurs: Necessity is the mother of equality. Where there is a shortage of men, women can thrive. In the nineteenth century, it was possible for women to enter industries, especially when they could serve other women. Dressmakers, milliners, general store owners, even mill and dairy owners thrived, often after husband died (or disappeared after long travel).

Women Activists: Temperance movement – Carrie Nations; also Women's suffrage movement

Cowboy Characters: Super macho; European and Mexican influences in the culture the equipment, and practices. Roundups, cattle drives, ranching.

Manufactured Male Identities: Showman, Spectacle, Con Artist: There were a number of traveling shows / spectacles that featured the “exotic” and captivated small towns. They traveled along the new railroads, and the towns that had train stations were the primary markets. Buffalo Bill Wild West Show; Pawnee Bill Wild West Show; also Barnum & Bailey Circus. Women were often acrobats and sharpshooters; many different nationalities represented. There were also notorious grifter types, many described by Mark Twain (Huckleberry Finn and also Life on the Mississippi), and also by Herman Melville - The Confidence-Man.

Twentieth Century

Traditional Nuclear Family Roles: For the middle class, traditional patriarchal model, with the male as breadwinner and working outside the home, and the mother staying at home to tend to children and the house. For working class, many women worked in other women's homes during the day, or in factories and offices (especially after WWII), with a resulting rise in demand for daycare and longer school hours. At the beginning of the century, women's skirts were long, hairstyles required elaborate preparation, and women generally did not operate machinery or drive. They also did not smoke or drink alcohol (although tippling opiate drinks with laudanum was common and acceptable for women in the beginning of the twentieth century).

Women in WWI: Women entered health care (nurses) and education (teachers), and also in different types of factories during WWI, due to labor shortages and the demands of the war effort.

Flappers: Women's roles changed a great deal after WWI, and the "flappers" of the 1920s were the "new woman," with bobbed hair, short skirts, who listened to jazz, drove cars, smoked cigarettes, and embarked on careers in previously male-dominated fields. The flappers were a bit scandalizing and not every woman embraced "Flapper" values.

Working Women / WWII: Rosie the Riveter was the emblem; propaganda campaign; 5 million women entered the workplace, and of those, 350,000 women working in factories, also WASPs (Women's Airforce Service Pilots) and minority women.

Women in the Universities: All-women colleges: Bryn Mawr, Smith, Barnard, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley are just a few. Many became co-ed in the 1970s, but before that time, were an important place for women "bluestockings" to

Women's Suffrage: Women lost the right to vote in 1787 and did not regain it on a national basis until the 19th Amendment, passed in 1920. Women activists such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked state by state.

Macho: A hyper-masculine stance often depicted in films, literature, comics, and graphic novels, specifically for Westerns and action-adventure genres.

Gender Ambiguity: Characterized many roles in the 20th century, especially in the 1960s when longer hair was in vogue for men, and a cross-over / sharing of roles began.

Marriage Arrangements: During the 20th century, political pressure to allow marriage between divorced men and women, and then later, between homosexual couples. The question for the future is whether or not there will be marriage between humans and non-humans (animals or robots), and while the question seems highly offensive and dehumanizing to a traditional philosophical vantage point, futurists believe that the human-machine / human-alter-biological boundaries are problematic. Marriage arrangements in this situation are about preservation of patrimony (inheritance) and not about sexual desire.

Discussion/Questions

1. In early traditions, women and men were assigned gender based on their ability to give birth. Lineage and family relations were considered to be most logically traced to the mother, since paternity could always be called into question. One would think that tracing family lineage through the mother would necessitate parallel power structures, but that was not necessarily the case. Discuss the role of gender and cultural power in early societies.
2. When the Europeans arrived in the Americas, there was a gender gap and males far outnumbered females. This imbalance was particularly the case in the frontier. What were some of the social implications of the gender imbalance?
3. In the 19th century, the roles for women and men expanded dramatically, and there were many opportunities for identity self-invention. Describe a few of the possible gendered identities available for both men and women, and discuss their relationship with social mobility (upward mobility).

4. The 20th century witnessed reversals of gender roles, as well as various seemingly retrograde movements as traditional gender roles were reinforced in very conservative groups. At the same time, new technology and new products made it possible for men and women to interact in new ways. Describe some of the changes in women's roles that corresponded to the advent of new technology and also socio-political events such as wars. How were men's roles impacted as well?

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