

A Research Guide to Secondary Sources on the American Fifties

Introductory remarks

Characterized by many critics as one of the most conservative American decades, the 1950s have remained in the collective consciousness as a repressive and conformist decade, a period when the prevailing moralism and conservatism manifested themselves in every aspect of social and cultural life. America witnessed an unprecedented economic growth, thriving industrial production and the subsequent unrestrained consumption of material goods: in elaborating on the Fifties one cannot avoid an extended reference to the material abundance, affluence and prosperity that have delineated the zeitgeist of the era. More specifically, in the recovery years after the war America witnessed an unparalleled growth of economic and corporate power mainly due to the triumph of technology and the subsequent increasing industrialization of the country. Consumerism and consumption also flourished on an unprecedented scale, helping to create the suburban lifestyle of white middle-class Americans and further reinforcing a climate of consensus and conformity. To many, the Fifties represented the fulfillment of the American dream of success in terms of its association with material abundance and affluence.

The Cold War is also central to understanding the Fifties. The frustration, terror and hysteria brought by the Cold War contributed to the conservative and homogenized character of Eisenhower's America, which found protection from the Red Scare in the isolation and paranoia inherent in a policy of strict containment of the Soviet menace. Unrestrained consumerism – the hallmark of the era – can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the desire for distraction from the anxieties of the Cold War; many Americans at the time seemed content to retreat into an isolationist and consumerist model of suburban lifestyle.

As far as the cultural production of the Fifties, it can be argued that it is not coherent since many critics have pointed to the concept of the 'cultural wars' of this distinctive era, when the country was struggling to overcome the shock of the Second World War and also protect itself from the communist threat. On the one hand we have conservative TV programs and films, and on the other, we have texts that respond to the society of the Fifties by defying literary conventions and norms and by subverting establishment expectations. The avant-garde quality of literary production of this decade finds its leading manifestation in the cultural production of the Beats, a burgeoning group of artists who in the second half of the decade signal a transitional phase for the States, that is, what we collectively refer to as 'the

Sixties.’ In this respect, the rebellious Sixties had already begun in the Fifties as a response to this conservative period.

Contents

1. General sources	2
2. Literature.....	4
3. The Beats	5
4. Religion.....	7
5. Science Fiction.....	7
6. Politics	8
7. Race relations.....	10
8. Films and television.....	10
9. Plays-Theatre	13
10. Suburbia, Middle-classness & Consumerism	13

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