

Decarbonizing the US History Survey: The Case of “Postwar Affluence”

When I joined Northumbria University, I inherited a second-year option module entitled “Affluence & Anxiety: US History from 1920 to 1960.” Designed by a colleague who had since left the university, the module’s chronological scope offered the students an opportunity to explore in depth major periods and events of the twentieth-century US, while leaving out the revolutionary decade of the 1960s and its aftermath, which were covered by another module. “Affluence & Anxiety,” as a module title, was not particularly original—it echoed the titles of other works about the postwar period—but it had a nice ring to it, as proven by its successful recruitment numbers each year, and it did convey pithily some of the ambiguities of the period.¹ Yet, as I started preparing for the new academic year, I found myself increasingly uncomfortable with the title and content of the module. “Affluence & Anxiety” was giving me a lot of anxiety, indeed, and its framing of “postwar affluence” appeared increasingly antiquated in a time of climate crisis and ecological collapse.

According to a well-established narrative found in recent, and not so recent, US history textbooks (reflected in the module guide provided by my predecessor), in the period bookended by World War II and the first oil shock of 1973, America experienced “a golden age” fueled by “almost miraculous economic growth.”² Propelled by mass consumerism, strong unionization and federal military spending, many Americans experienced what came to be known as “the good life”: high wages, a single-family home, holidays, etc. Of course, the traditional “postwar affluence” narrative was never wholly celebratory. In his influential 1958 book, *The Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith already condemned the era’s excessive emphasis on the consumption of luxury goods and services and the lack of investment in public infrastructure that would reduce economic inequalities.³ Even more crucially, scholars have since shown that the “good life” remained largely outside the reach of African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities due to persistent forms of discrimination. In addition, the narrative usually integrates criticisms of the era’s consensual embrace of the suburban dream and strict gender roles coming from women’s history.

It soon became clear to me that this traditional narrative had remained essentially untouched since the late 1990s. More surprisingly, the “affluent society” narrative deployed in virtually all US history textbooks of the past 30 years was seemingly impervious to the insights of environmental history. Affluence, according to this narrative, was not equally shared but it was, fundamentally, A Good Thing. More often than not, the ecological choices that had buttressed the “affluent society” were ignored.

¹ Carl N. Degler, *Affluence and Anxiety: America Since 1945* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1975); Gary Donaldson, *Abundance and Anxiety: America, 1945-1960* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1997).

² Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 9th edition (McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2018).

³ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998).

It is high time that we challenge the standard narrative of a postwar affluence “only” mired by class, racial and gender inequalities. The affluent lifestyle that many white Americans enjoyed in the postwar period cannot be presented to our students—who belong to the so-called “Green Generation”—without a thorough contextualization of its role in the advent of the “Anthropocene,” a new geological epoch characterized by humans’ unprecedented geological imprint on the planet.⁴ The US “good life” was predicated on economic and racial inequalities and on stifling gender roles. But it was also fundamentally unsustainable, and it contributed to the “Great Acceleration,” which has led to a dramatic increase in carbon dioxide emissions.⁵ We need a narrative of postwar affluence that foregrounds the dependency pathways it created and the environmental damages it generated at the time, as well as those it locked in for the future. The standard narrative repeated across the board about postwar affluence normalizes this period of extraordinary reliance on fossil fuels, contributing to a sense of misplaced nostalgia for more simple times, when it should be treated as anomalous. It is fundamentally unrepresentative in the long history of humans’ relations with their biosphere.

Before going further, let me acknowledge the fact that this challenge is not unique to US history. In France, the period 1946-1975 famously earned for itself “the thirty glorious years” label in reference to the cycle of constant growth the country experienced at the time. French textbooks relay a narrative according to which French people embraced progress and modernity with open arms. Over the past ten years, historians have challenged this celebratory narrative and have called for one that integrates dissenting voices and the “secondary effects of the development model adopted after 1945.”⁶ Crucially, these scholars have highlighted the ways in which France’s extraordinary growth depended on easy access to cheap resources and energy extracted from its ex-colonies, where the most egregious environmental damages were conveniently circumscribed.

Just like the “thirty glorious years” have been renamed, quite provocatively, “the thirty ravaging years” by some French historians, it is time more US historians (and US history textbooks) take note of the vast bibliography that now exists in environmental history that documents the ravages of the postwar “economic miracle.”⁷ Since it would not be fair to base my comments on older textbooks, let me consider two recent iterations. In *These United States*, the excellent textbook published by Glenda Gilmore and Thomas Sugrue in 2015, the problems associated with postwar prosperity (chapter 9 “Postwar Prosperity and its Discontents”) are decidedly not environmental in nature. Even sections dedicated to “Automobility” and “Air-conditioned America” remain entirely silent on the question of their environmental costs. It is not until the chapter dedicated to “The Troubled 1970s” (chapter

⁴ Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?,” *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614–21.

⁵ J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁶ Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu, and Christophe Bonneuil, *Une autre histoire des “Trente Glorieuses” : Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d’après-guerre* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2013), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

13), which details the rise of the environmental movement and the success of the first Earth Day, that we learn about the environmental consequences associated with the suburban boom and “the economic miracle.”⁸ The dissociation between the two stories—one of affluence in the 1950s-1960s and one of environmental awareness in the late 1960s and 1970s—is problematic not only because it silences the environmentalist voices that were already active in the supposedly quiescent 1950s, but also because it perpetuates, unwittingly, a triumphant narrative of growth untarnished by its associated effects.

In particular, it fails to highlight the ways in which decisions made in that earlier period eliminated alternative pathways and locked the nation’s future along certain energy choices. One might wonder why, for instance, the story of “air-conditioned America” is not tempered by the findings in Andrew Needham’s book *Power Lines*, which reveals how the metropolitan growth of Phoenix and the Southwest—itsself largely predicated on the democratization of air conditioning—was tied to the mining and burning of coal on Navajo land. In the 1970s, Navajo nationalists made the connection explicit when they denounced the ways in which the pollution associated with an increase in electricity use in California, Arizona and Nevada was externalized to their territories.⁹

Similarly, Sugrue and Gilmore do not take hue of the environmental consequences of the postwar boom in car ownership and the construction of the interstate highway system. While they do note the implication of the increase in oil consumption in terms of importations and foreign policy, they fail to frame this development as the continuation of a fundamentally unsustainable “technological ecosystem” dependent on cheap oil. Using Christopher Sellers’ *Car Country* would go a long way towards foregrounding the conditions and incentives that underpinned the creation of “car-centered landscapes” and their consequences on the nation’s ecosystems (from tailpipe emissions to the loss of open space). How “growth” became synonymous with “car-dependent growth” in the postwar US is a crucial insight we, as educators, ought to highlight to students. And yet, such precious scholarship too often remains unheeded.¹⁰

The treatment of postwar affluence in the free, online, collaborative textbook the American Yawp is similarly lacking an environmental history angle. Chapter 26, dedicated to the “Affluent Society,” zeroes in on “the rise of the suburbs,” highlighting how the postwar construction boom fueled economic growth while further entrenching racial inequality and prescriptive gender roles.¹¹ Yet the chapter remains silent on the environmental consequences of the suburban boom, even though historian Adam Rome wrote a pathbreaking book on the

⁸ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Thomas J. Sugrue, *These United States: A Nation in the Making, 1890 to the Present* (New York ; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 341–42 & 517–20.

⁹ Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), x, xxxiii & 287.

¹¹ *The American Yawp*, chapter 26 “The Affluent Society.” Available at <http://www.americanyawp.com/text/26-the-affluent-society/> (accessed July 20, 2021).

topic twenty years ago.¹² This omission prompted me to email the editors of the American Yawp and offer to craft a paragraph that would account for this story. The paragraph (see below in abridged form), which will be integrated with the 2021-2022 update, not only describes the environmental damages associated with suburban construction, but also foregrounds the ways in which decisions made in the postwar period paved the way for the climate crisis.

The postwar suburban boom did not just increase existing racial inequalities. It also entrenched unsustainable modes of living and precipitated a major environmental crisis with repercussions across the nation. The introduction of mass production techniques in housing brought ecological destruction on an unprecedented scale. Historian Adam Rome notes that “a territory roughly the size of Rhode Island was bulldozed for urban development” every year. [...] The destructiveness of suburban sprawl did not go unnoticed. [...] By the time Rachel Carson published her *Silent Spring* in 1962, [...] many Americans were ready to receive her message. Stories of kitchen faucets spouting detergent foams and children playing in effluents had brought the point home: comfort and convenience should not come at all cost. Yet most of the Americans who joined the early environmentalist crusades of the 1950s and 1960s rarely questioned the foundations of the suburban ideal. The reliance on the individual car and the idealization of the single-family home prevented fundamental shifts in land and energy use. Ultimately, postwar environmentalism failed to prevent the onset of the climate crisis.

Introducing the phrase “the climate crisis” in a US history textbook for a period preceding the 1990s, or even the 1970s, is unusual and comes with potential challenges. In a context where climate denialism has been rampant, including in the highest spheres of politics under the Trump administration, making such statements requires thorough references lest readers accuse the textbook editors of politicizing history. The editors thus asked, in addition to the reference to Rome’s work, for a list of more general environmental histories of the postwar period.

The case study I develop here is a stark example of the persistent failure of environmental history to influence the historical narrative of the nation at large. For all its trendiness, environmental history has yet to be fully integrated in US history survey courses. As historian Ellen Stroud remarked, the environment too often “surfaces in an occasional lecture—on the Columbian Exchange, or the Dust Bowl, or Love Canal.”¹³ Explaining this paradox is tricky: how is it that a field rich with talented scholars, prize-winning books and benefiting from a growing interest from undergraduates eager to understand our present challenges remains unable to fundamentally alter the way US history is taught?

In the case of postwar affluence, I can identify at least two factors that explain the traditional narrative’s persistence. First, US history and American studies remain tied to an origin story that links material abundance with democracy and the full realization of freedom. From Jefferson’s agrarian ideals to the conquest of the West, to Roosevelt’s four freedoms (including “freedom from want”), the idea that America’s bountiful nature and unlimited natural resources served as a strong foundation for the continuing democratization of the

¹² Adam W. Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹³ Ellen Stroud, “Environmental History and the U.S. Survey Course,” published on May 25, 2017. <http://www.processhistory.org/environmental-history-survey/> (accessed March 17, 2021).

country is difficult to dislodge. In this context, historians have been reluctant to consider together the positive social developments associated with postwar affluence—rising wages, the development of the welfare state, etc.—and its environmental costs. Second, the postwar US adopted an energy system reliant on oil, coal, and nuclear power, which enabled the externalization of environmental damages both in time (far into the future) and in space (in marginal regions of the country and the globe). It is easier to ignore environmental damages if they remain out of sight, even for historians trained to make connections between complex phenomena. In the case of the postwar US, environmental costs were often rejected outside of the nation’s borders. Recent environmental histories of popular consumer products have revealed how staples of the postwar American diet—the banana and Coca-Cola—implied the externalization of environmental and health costs in faraway places, from depleted underground aquifers and polluted streams in India to Honduran field hands exposed to harmful pesticides.¹⁴ These insights need to be more systematically integrated into the standard narrative of the postwar consumer cornucopia. Shedding light on the hidden costs of American capitalism would not only give a more rounded picture of postwar affluence, but it would also contribute to making US history less insular and more transnational.

By offering this example of how the postwar affluence narrative can and should be challenged from an environmental history perspective, I hope to inspire other historians and educators to question their teaching material and the assumptions that underlay standard narratives about growth and conquest. It is only by subjecting all periods and events to this kind of scrutiny that we will be able to embed the climate crisis and its origins in the American studies curriculum.

¹⁴ Bartow J. Elmore, *Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017); John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).