

LATE MODERN US HISTORY 1975-2010

PHILIP JENKINS

[Institute for Studies of Religion](#)

[History Department](#)

Baylor University

Welcome to the class!

In this first session, we will describe the goals of the course, and provide some orientation for the subject matter. To put the period in question, let's consider a simple question. What are the most significant changes that have occurred in the US since, say, the mid-1970s? What, so to speak, are the megatrends? (Putting aside such incidentals as men's hair length and the size of car fins).

If you imagine someone time traveling between the eras, what would strike them? if you watch a film or television program from the 1960s or 1970s, count the points that strike you as weird or different, especially in everyday interactions, behavior, and speech. What do people then do without comment that today could get you arrested or thrown out? Such issues of shifting mores have been obvious in recent years in matters like racial interactions and language, and also appropriate gender behavior, with sexual harassment a prime example.

So many such impressions are subjective, but here are a few obvious broad themes. Many of these ideas were present in the 1970s, at least in an avant-garde form, but subsequently they have become completely mainstream, and have in a sense become the dominant culture. Together, they constitute a remarkable revolution in the most basic assumptions of life - of family and intimate relationships, of work and residence, of thinking and speaking, of getting and spending. That is apart from a basic redefinition of ideas of nation and society, flag and politics, and the role of government.

We certainly will not be working through this in any detail! However, the individual points here will be useful for understanding pretty much all of the classes following.

I will organize these points under the following subheadings:

Sexuality and Gender

Family

Economy, Work, and Prosperity

Finance

Technology and Science

Bioscience and Biomedicine

Energy

Cities

Politics and Parties

Poverty and Crime

Leisure

Food and Drink

Ethnicity, Race and Geography

Religion

Military

The Wider World

Here, then, are the major themes that strike me:

Sexuality and Gender

-General mainstreaming of some of the most seemingly radical innovations of the socially revolutionary years of the late 1960s.

-Enormous changes in gender roles and attitudes and the status of women.

-Widespread perception of sexual dangers to women and children. Creation of brand new terminology and concepts, such as “stalking” and “sexual harassment,” “sexual predators,” and “survivors” of abuse or rape.

-Fundamental changes in public sexual morality, especially approving and mainstreaming homosexuality.

-Fundamental changes in public sexual morality, especially condemning and stigmatizing sexual activity with minors.

-As in the case of gender issues, changed attitudes to sexual identity are obvious from everyday interactions and language, not to mention the everyday practice of the mass media. The areas of what people are and are not allowed to say in public discourse have both been utterly remapped.

-Through the Internet, effective legalization and general availability of pornography that would once have been considered intolerably hard core.

-Much more restrictive and often puritanical attitudes to the control of children and the definition of childhood. Much heightened sensitivity to child sexual abuse and maltreatment. (Although this trend coincides with the mass availability of pornography noted above!)

Family

-Implosion of the "standard" nuclear family unit, the change being mapped both by the number of people living alone, by those cohabiting without marriage, and also bearing children outside marriage.

-Although not necessarily uniquely influential in itself, the implementation and acceptance of same sex marriage bespeaks the mind-boggling scale of the social and cultural transformation since the 1970s. The approval of adoption by same sex couples is in some ways even more far-reaching.

-Changes in employment as well as sexual attitudes lead to a lengthy delay in the formation of families and households, resulting in what has been called a prolongation of adolescence far beyond anything known in earlier decades.

-Greatly raised sensibility to issues of physical and mental disability.

Economy, Work, and Prosperity

-Collapse of the old industrial structures and the working classes that depended on them. Think Detroit.

-Collapse of old assumption about length and certainty of employment. Shift in employment from ideal of lifetime career to short-term and contract work.

-Collapse of older models of paying for retirement.

-Fundamental shift in employment patterns towards the service sector, to high tech, to finance, to medical- and pharmaceutical-related industries. Think Pittsburgh.

-Overall, a total change in the experience of work, the makeup of the workforce, the location of the workplace, and the look of work-space. With all that implies for the gender balance of that workforce and the required levels of skill and education.

-Multiple revolutions in retailing, including the rise and fall of the mall, and the massive emergence of online business. Think Amazon.

-Central role of big box stores and discount stores. Think Walmart, Sam's Club and Costco.

-Application of information technology: bar codes, scanners, ATMs.

-A litigation revolution has transformed attitudes to liability for possible hazards and suffering.

-Spread of privatization and non-state models, represented for instance by charter schools.

Finance

- A series of changes and innovations that effectively created our present financial world.
- This period - and especially the 1975-85 decade – substantially created the economic and financial world we know today. Among other things, that included the mass popularity of mutual funds and IRAs, and the use of 401k's as a primary means of retirement savings for a majority of Americans.

Technology and Science

- Revolutionary advent of information technology, as reflected for instance in the universal availability of computers, smartphones, GPS, and all they imply, especially for commerce. Microprocessors.

The rise of artificial intelligence

- Electronic technologies and computers revolutionize automobiles and transportation.
- Rapid acceleration of communications: fiber optics.
- Rise and dominance of social media. Think Google, Youtube, Twitter, Facebook.... The sense of connection.
- A case can be made that the presence of social media and the Internet have caused and are causing a fundamental reorientation of the way people think, remember, and organize and retrieve information, on a scale unparalleled at least since the coming of printing six centuries ago.
- Portability of sophisticated electronic devices. Think of the disappearance of the once-ubiquitous pay-phone.
- Radical democratization of access to information, on a global scale and instant in nature.
- Impact of Big Data and GIS in many fields, including government. Think COMPSTAT and criminal justice.
- Widespread impact of new materials, new alloys and coatings. Major innovations include CFRPs and carbon fiber composites, carbon nanotubes, graphene, and quasicrystals. Beginnings of nanotechnology revolution.

Bioscience and Biomedicine

-Massive leaps forward in biological sciences and their practical real-world applications, including pharmaceuticals.

-Gene therapy and genetic engineering, cloning, cell therapy.

-Huge technological improvements in many spheres, but most remarkably perhaps in medicine. See for instance imaging techniques like MRIs, or non-invasive laser/robotic surgery (laparoscopy).

-Understanding of human brain revolutionized by non-invasive imaging techniques (CAT and PET scans), and growth of neurochemistry: insights provide the basis for new treatments and pharmaceuticals.

-Revolutionary impact of DNA testing and sequencing in many practical fields, including criminal justice, as well as academic disciplines (eg study of human origins)

Energy

-Reorientation of American energy needs and concerns based on the rise of domestic sources, especially shale oil.

-Grave new concerns about environmental and ecological dangers. Major social shift towards recycling, and combating disposable objects.

-Surging concern about global climate change, and calls to restructure society and economy in response.

Cities

-Radical transformation of cities and urban living, and the restored vitality of some inner cities. The coming of gentrification. Think Brooklyn or Oakland.

-Central role of universities and colleges as driving forces in economic innovation, prosperity and employment (including role of specialized research incubators, hospitals and medical schools). Central role too in preserving and reviving older cities, especially where there are clusters of higher educational institutions.

-The World of “Eds and Meds,” in which universities, medical schools, and medical complexes dominate employment in large cities.

-Development of many new patterns of urban life including exurbs, and areas dependent on airports (aerotropolis).

-Spectacular ethnic diversification of cities (see below).

Politics and Parties

-Vastly harder divisions between parties, and the near extinction of liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. On both sides, growth of a series of insuperable litmus tests, usually on matters involving gender or sexuality.

-Major gender gaps divide the parties.

-Transformation of older (New Deal-era) attitudes to the proper role of government and official regulation.

-Major shift in assumed role of the state and the appropriate tax burden.

-Wider public acceptance of laissez-faire economics and free trade.

-Emergence and growth of conservative religious pressure groups as major forces within the Republican Party.

-Emergence and growth of the "gun lobby" as a law and order movement.

-Central importance of information technologies and social media for political organizing, electioneering, and fund-raising.

Poverty and Crime

-Greatly increased income inequality, and stagnating real incomes: significant weakening of the middle classes.

-Disappearance of many older assumptions about welfare and social safety nets.

-The unprecedented social experiment of mass incarceration and criminalization. How the drug war became American urban policy.

-Historic collapse in crime rates of all kinds, especially violence and homicide.

Leisure

-Vast diversification of media and the control/dissemination of news. Major factors include cable television and, of course, the internet allowing people to "cut the cord" forever.

-Fragmenting and diversification of audiences and cultures; replacement of unified mass national and regional audiences by niche cultures.

-Massive shifts in censorship standards, both towards greater sexual permissiveness, and towards greater restrictions in other areas.

-Obviously, art, literature and music are always in flux, but some of the transformations in this era really were game-changing. Think for instance of the racial revolution implied by the very wide acceptance of hip hop culture; or the total change in movies and TV permitted by new computer effects and CGI.

-Massive new industry of video gaming.

-Fundamental restructuring of sports, including (for instance) the emergence of the Superbowl as a key national event; the rise of basketball; and the growth of NASCAR. Each of these trends says something about other issues raised here, including regional and racial patterns, consumerism, and the power of media.

-Unprecedented cultures of celebrity and instant sensation, intensified by sharply reduced standards of censorship in sexual matters.

-Widespread legalization of casino gambling, with special impact on economic life of Native American communities.

Food and Drink

-Much different and more intolerant attitudes to the use and abuse of substances, including alcohol and tobacco.

-Very different and more cosmopolitan attitudes towards food, and the kinds of food and beverage that are available.

-The whole history of craft beer (for instance) falls within this time period, with all it suggests for consumer tastes and market segmentation.

-The coming of the coffee shop. This is not a trend in itself as an epitome of a dozen others, and for all those stores say about public taste, attitudes to consumption, public and private space, the decline of the older economies and sources of employment, the coming of portable technology ... Seriously, put it all together and it would have staggered someone from 1975. Think any Starbuck's (and Starbuck's alone now has 24,000 locations).

Ethnicity, Race and Geography

-Major shifts in national geography away from old industrial centers, and the continuing rise of the South and West, and the Sunbelt.

-Mass immigration comparable to the great wave of c.1890-1920. The rise of Asian America, Latino America, African America....

-Enormous diversification of ethnic and racial make-up of population, and the rise of majority-minority communities

-In racial interactions, a revolutionary shift in the sense of appropriate language and public discourse.

-Massive decline in taboos against inter-racial sexual relations.

-Widespread re-evaluation of national and patriotic symbols in the light of new racial and gender attitudes, and a call for new ways of telling that history. Resulting "History Wars." Think of Harriet Tubman replacing Andy Jackson on the \$20 bill. Think also of Columbus Day evolving into Indigenous People's Day.

Religion

-New religious structures and assumptions, reflected by new institutions such as megachurches.

-Broader religious diversity outside Christianity, although this is accompanied by a much greater diversity within Christianity itself.

-Massive upsurge of immigrant Christian congregations.

-Huge diversification of Roman Catholic church, and expansion of Latino and Asian presence.

-Steep decline of mainline Protestant churches.

Major expansion of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, largely driven by demographic change.

-Religions of all kinds have been shaken, revived and/or transformed beyond recognition by the rise of new sensibilities involving gender and sexual identity. In the mid-1970s, ordaining women was a revolutionary and wildly controversial step for most denominations. Today, it is absolutely commonplace for many if not all traditions, Christian and Jewish.

-The clergy abuse crisis caused a stunning collapse in the authority and prestige of the Roman Catholic church, and transformed attitudes to clerical prestige.

-Associated with the abuse issue has been the impact of new concepts of legal responsibility and the threat of litigation, which has transformed the treatment of children, not to mention the construction of church buildings.

-A growing willingness for people to claim their religious identity as "none," although the consequences of this for actual levels of unbelief remain controversial.

Military

-Collapse of older assumptions about the nature of the armed forces as an expression of the nation, with [the disappearance of the military draft](#). New ideologies of a professional military.

-Revolution in Military Affairs: laser guided weapons, smart bombs and precision weapons, drones, stealth technology, GPS Each of these is almost a revolution in its own right

-Cyberwar and electronic warfare

-Application of space technology and satellite reconnaissance

-New (well, revived) emphasis on counter-insurgency, and Fourth Generation Warfare involving non-state actors. The Global War on Terror. Hybrid warfare.

-The prospect of mega-terror attacks on US soil.

-Impact of new concepts of gender throughout the armed forces.

The Wider World

-Completely transformed international relations, and the evaporation of the old Cold War order with its nuclear fears. (Whether we are right to abandon such nuclear nightmares remains an open question).

-Awareness of living in a multi-polar world, in which the US coexists with such other powers as China (above all), as well as India, the European Union ...

-The Rise of China, a megatrend all in its own right: economic, political, military, cultural.

-New awareness of terrorism and violence by sub-state actors, and a vastly greater concern with the Middle East and the Islamic world.

-New focus on religion as a form of ideology driving political behavior.

-Collapse of state systems across much of the Middle East, and the emergence of an Arc of Crisis from North Africa through South Asia.

That's close to a hundred significant transformation right there, and you could easily add to the list. In fact, I'd be grateful for other suggestions. This is a work in progress