

Sample Teaching Materials  
Teaching the History of Capitalism  
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1. The following is a paper topic I sometimes use in an upper-level class on antebellum reformers and reform activities. Based on the 1854 temperance novel *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, it implicitly asks students in 5-7 pages to think about the connections between the temperance movement and the emerging mores and values of industrial capitalism:

“Using the plot and characters of T.S. Arthur’s *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* to support your answer, explain the connection temperance reformers made between the health and habits of individual persons and the health and habits of the larger society. Why did they believe it was impossible to reform one without reforming the other?”

2. The following are some sample essay questions I ask students in the introductory US History survey. As is true of the paper topic above, the questions ask them to think about the changing nature and implications of capitalism without explicitly using the term.

A. In the decades after 1815, the American economy went from being rooted primarily in local and regional markets to one with markets that were increasingly integrated, interconnected, and national in scope. What were the critical factors enabling that sort of transformation?

B. How did the changing economy of the first half of the nineteenth century alter the lives of Americans in the middle and working classes? What sorts of cultural and ideological developments helped ease the disorientation and anxieties produced by those changes?

C. Although both Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson both supported American independence from England, they had different ideas about the future of the United States. Describe the visions of both Hamilton and Jefferson. Whose vision would you argue matched the ways America grew and developed between 1790 and 1840?

D. To what extent did new sorts of technological innovations and advances enable American expansion and economic development in the first half of the nineteenth century? Provide at least four concrete examples of important technological change and discuss their significance.

3. Finally, as an example of an underused source that professors might use for an introductory US History course, a course on antebellum reform, a course on the history of capitalism, a course on labor history, or a number of others, I would recommend Dr. John Griscom, “The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Class of New York,” from 1845. It’s not the easiest read for freshmen, but it has some great discussion material in it about the material lives of slum dwellers in early industrial America and about the approach of certain members of the middle class toward the problems of capitalism in urban spaces.