Teaching American History Controversial Issue Lesson Plan

**Lesson Title:** The Mudsill Theory

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**Appropriate for Grade Level(s):** High School Social Studies, esp. US & World History

**US History Standard(s):** H1.[9-12].1-5, 8; H2.[9-12].1

**Controversial Issue:** The notion that every society needs and is based on a class of menial laborers who do the unskilled drudgery tasks necessary for others to dedicate their talents towards the more elevated pursuits of governance, technology, philosophy, the arts, etc. which drives the progress of a civilization.

**Objective(s): At the end of this lesson, students will be able to…** Use this concept as a lens in analyzing the social & economic systems in US and World History

**Rationale: Why Teach This Issue? (50-100 words)** This is a way to have the students generate a course long essential question that is as applicable to today as it was since the first river valley civilizations arose out of the Neolithic Revolution. Perhaps if the students are involved in formulating their own essential questions, it will have more relevance and sticking power.

**Student Readings (list):** "The 'Mudsill' Theory," by James Henry Hammond

Speech to the U.S. Senate, March 4, 1858

*Slavery Defended: the Views of the Old South*, ed. Eric McKitrick (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1963) pg. 122

“In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is, a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have, or you would not have that other class which leads progress, civilization, and refinement. It constitutes the very mud-sill of society and of political government; and you might as well attempt to build a house in the air, as to build either the one or the other, except on this mud-sill. Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to that purpose to her hand. A race inferior to her own, but eminently qualified in temper, in vigor, in docility, in capacity to stand the climate, to answer all her purposes. We use them for our purpose, and call them slaves. We found them slaves by the common "consent of mankind," which, according to Cicero, *"lex naturae est."* The highest proof of what is Nature's law. We are old-fashioned at the South yet; slave is a word discarded now by "ears polite;" I will not characterize that class at the North by that term; but you have it; it is there; it is everywhere; it is eternal.”

**Total Time Needed:** one 50 minute class period

**Historical Background & Context (+/- 250 words):** Ever since the rise of civilization, society has become stratified based upon economic factors, with the most menial tasks done by those on the bottom of the social hierarchy. This was acknowledged as the debate over slavery intensified during the run up to the Civil War by South Carolina senator Henry James Hammond in a speech to the US senate in which he put forth his “mud sill” theory of social organization. This refers to the notion that every society needs people to do the drudgery and menial tasks upon which the rest of society rests, hence the foundation analogy. This, according to Hammond, allows for the elites to concern themselves with furthering the progress of the society. While rejecting Hammond’s belief that Africans were naturally inclined for this class, his basic theory has merit, which leads to the reason this document was selected, that forming the basis of the following essential question: How does a societal and economic system fulfill the need for the lowest form of labor and be non-exploitive, fair and just? Or is that possible? Will the lowest classes always be exploited?

**Detailed Steps of Lesson (including teaching methods/strategies that engage student participation):**

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| **Time Frame****(e.g. 15 minutes)** | **What is the teacher doing?**  | **What are students doing?** |
| 10-15 | Ask students to rank in order of income the list of professions/ jobs (see below for list) and then rank them based on their necessity to society. Does the order change? Why/why not? Discuss | Students will rank professions/ jobs based on income and then their necessity to society. They will compare the lists and contemplate reasons for differences. Discuss |
| 5-10 | Handout Hammond’s speech excerpt read as a class, discuss for meaning & merit | Read Hammond’s speech excerpt, discuss for meaning & merit. |
| 20-30 | Put students in groups, have them brainstorm one group, past or present, that they feel have been particularly exploited. Share with class and discuss how exploitation could be lessened and still perform the job at hand. | Each group is responsible for leading the class in a 5 min. discussion based on an example of economic exploitation and how this exploitation could be ameliorated without abandoning the job at hand. |
| 5-10 | Each group must come up with an essential question that captures this concept. Have them write it on a strip of transparency and put them up on the overhead. Guide students in revising into a single question. | In their groups, students will formulate an essential question that captures this concept and write on a strip of transparency. After seeing other groups’ questions, a single essential question will be formulated. |
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|  |  | (Add more rows, if necessary.) |

**How will students reflect on their learning & understanding?** Through group and class discussions; application of the essential question throughout the year.

**Description of Lesson Assessment Tied to Objective/Standards:** Standard group &class discussion system, teacher to use their own standard s& rubric

**Attached to the following pages are all readings, primary sources, guided questions, worksheets, assignment guidelines, rubrics, etc.**

**Professions/ jobs to rank:** fireman, surgeon, professional athlete, hotel maid, teacher, lawyer, congressman, skilled construction worker, unskilled construction worker, agricultural worker, real estate broker, prison guard, bus driver, airline pilot. You may add/subtract from this list as you see fit.

**Readings:** See above (Hammond’s excerpt).