

# Lesson Plan One: How to Examine *Social Justice*

## Introduction

In retrospect, looking back upon the Great Depression years, through the experience of the Holocaust, the civil rights movement, and the present-day nostalgia for World War II and "simpler times," Fr. Coughlin seems a very strange figure to us in the twenty-first century. He is held up as a figure of abject shame, a lone voice shouting in the darkness, a radical bigot apart from and unlike the mainstream of the public mind. For some his relative obscurity to the public consciousness, especially in relation to President Franklin Roosevelt, raises the specter that only troublemakers and historians seek to revive his memory to mock and defame revered religious institutions. We see a man whose star rose meteorically and fell just as quickly; who appealed particularly at the end, to the radical fringe. Why then pay attention to Coughlin? Why not consign him to the famous "dustbin of history"? What purpose could he serve?

Coughlin is deserving of attention not to repair his reputation, but to serve several other interests. First, by banishing him from our historical narrative distorts our understanding of a particular era in U.S. history. It further leaves his memory to sensation and as a bizarre iconic figure to certain elements of society. That which is forbidden tantalizes. Whether we like it or not, we own Coughlin and his legacy and it must be acknowledged. Bringing him into the limelight of historical analysis and public discussion we examine and engage his views and significance without leaving it to the shadows of public memory. Though such a discussion might bring Coughlin a certain level of notoriety, at the same time it is an opportunity to engage troubling religious and social issues that remain with us to the present day.

Within one of the most desperate times in the nation's history, Coughlin, along with Louisiana Senator Huey Long, offered immediate and seemingly concrete answers to what ailed society through the powerful new medium of radio. Many listened to Coughlin's broadcasts and believed that they knew who was to blame for their woes and how they could understand what had happened to their lives. For the present-day, these writings and broadcasts also remind that the Great Depression was more than apple sellers and hoboes. The simple economic and social nostrums offered by both the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations did not alleviate the fears and unease of a public witnessing suffering all around them.

Finally, Coughlin had an audience both in person, print, and through his broadcasts. Despite the difficulty of obtaining precise listener numbers in a pre-Nielson ratings era, it can be safely assumed that millions had heard at least one broadcast or come into contact with Coughlin at some point. He spoke, even if only for a short time, to the anger and frustration that many felt, and why he could have had such an audience is of no small concern to us today living within a media saturated society. The harsh religious attacks made against the nation's Jewish community did not emerge from a vacuum. Much like his economic views, these visions of conspiracy speak to a mindset present even today. Only by engaging, analyzing, and critiquing our collective history can we hope to learn of the past through the people who lived it. This project does not seek to rehabilitate Coughlin, but it does ask that we examine a piece of our history that discomfits and disquiets.

## I. Lesson Description

A key task in reading *Social Justice*, his pamphlets, and the broadcasts is understanding the way that Coughlin used language and how he formed his arguments. Though Coughlin sometimes did resort to showy and overwrought public speeches, notably at the Townsend convention at Cleveland in July 1936, he rarely did so during his broadcasts, and almost never in print. Thus, comparisons to the speeches of Adolph Hitler or Joseph Goebbels are not accurate in regards to the audience, subtlety, and style that Coughlin employed. *Social Justice* should be viewed as the most well thought out of all the materials, and the most careful in terms of its use of language and overall presentation. The reasons for that included avoiding censorship from both the Detroit diocese of the Catholic Church and the Post Office, that it was a polished publication and not "off-the-cuff," and as a reflection of Coughlin's own positions, thoughts, purpose, and persona.

From all of this comes a publication that at first glance appears entirely reasonable in tone and presentation. Simply put, the magazine resembles one of many with images, text, and letters to the editor. When students read the articles, the word choices, reasoning, and ideas may sound perfectly reasonable since that was Coughlin's entire goal. These are not the rantings of a deranged madman, rather an individual who has a particular point to prove and a method by which to approach his subjects. Decoding Coughlin requires an examination and understanding of his language choice, structure, and the context that influenced his magazine.

### The Assignment

Students, either in groups or individually, will engage with Great Depression era audio materials and publications, including *Social Justice*, to contextualize both Fr. Coughlin and his ideas. Audio clips of Adolph Hitler and Fr. Coughlin will demonstrate the sharp contrast in style and purpose. Students will use a worksheet to analyze these differences and to understand how to avoid simplistic comparisons and the misuse of historical figures. Comparisons between *Social Justice* and contemporary publications will help students understand the choices made for the visual appearance of the magazine. Finally, an analysis of the language and content through three separate issues of *Social Justice* will inform student understanding of Coughlin's ideas and how he used language to make seemingly "reasonable" arguments cloaked in everyday words.

## II. Lesson / Learning Objectives and Benchmarks:

*Students will:*

- Analyze the content and language used in *Social Justice* to study how an author uses language to make an argument.
- Evaluate how the ideas and concepts of groups and individuals change across time, and how they reflect and are impacted by the broader historical context they exist in.
- Identify the key points of various media types.
- Examine the information learned within the historical context of the Great Depression.

- Assess the ways *Social Justice* can be used in historical research and how to think critically about the content of primary sources.

### III. Lesson Outcomes and Requirements:

#### A. Skills Attained:

- Ability to analyze the content of primary sources within their historical contexts.
- Use primary sources to conduct research.
- Ability to use historical method to critically assess evidence.
- An ability to use various kinds of media within an historical context.

#### B. Method / Materials:

- Internet access to use *Social Justice* and other web-based material.
- Worksheets to provide the questions for analysis.
- Readings for the class from *Social Justice*.

### IV. Lesson Activities:

#### *Recommended Time Required:*

One or two class periods.

#### *Procedures:*

1. Using the "Historical Materials Worksheet," have the students listen to a present-day speech by a politician or public figure of your choice and let them record their ideas. Have the students listen to a clip of a speech by Adolph Hitler (remind them not to get stuck on the language) and emphasize the tone and delivery style. Again, let them record their ideas on the sheet. Finally, play a clip of Fr. Coughlin and repeat as with the earlier clips.
2. Discuss with the students what makes these speakers' styles similar or different using the questions from the worksheets. Make sure to emphasize that the purpose of the speech and the persona of the person has a major impact on how that person will deliver a message, and the medium it is delivered over also has a major influence. If you use YouTube, have the students consider whether the speaker ever expects to have their words used again in a different context outside of what it was originally intended.

3. Have the students visit the site "1930s in Print" at the University of Virginia's site (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/Print/printindex.html#zines>)

Let them explore how the different publications on the site work with art, style, and where available, content. Have the students use the "Historical Materials Worksheet" to record their observations.

Then have the students examine the *Social Justice* files and continue to use the worksheet. Make sure that they specifically look at the cover art from the various years, and then examine the following several articles for the specific content they contain:

- April 17, 1936, Vol.1, No.6, pg.16, "Father Coughlin's Weekly Letter: To the District Officers"
- June 5, 1936, Vol.1, No.13, pg.16, "Father Coughlin's Weekly Letter: Why I Cannot Support the New Deal."
- November 28, 1938, Vol.2A, No.22, pg.7,10, "From the Tower: Persecution: Jewish and Christian"
- also use Sept. 14,1936, Vol.2, No.8,pg.4 "Is Fr. Coughlin a Jew-Baiter?" for comparison.

Make sure to have the students assess what is the change in tone and what kinds of additional information would they need to find in order for this document to make sense to them.

- What are Coughlin's major themes?
- How does he use language?
- How does he also use religion to justify and support his positions?
- Why would his identity as a man in a position of religious authority also lend credibility to his assertions?

## V. Independent Practice:

Students could take time to further research particular ideas and themes within *Social Justice* to bring back for an expanded discussion / analysis of their content.

## VI. Bibliography / List of Resources:

Have students especially work with the "How to Use the *Social Justice* Collection Materials" and to work with primary sources prior to this class period.

A very good general reading for students is Chapter 11 "Maturity" in Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Seasons of Grace: A History of the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990): 297-342.

# Historical Materials Analysis Worksheet

## 1. Type of Material (Check one)

- |                                     |  |   |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper  | <input type="checkbox"/> Map           | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letter     | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegram      | <input type="checkbox"/> Congressional Record |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Patent     | <input type="checkbox"/> Press Release | <input type="checkbox"/> Census Report        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum | <input type="checkbox"/> Report        | <input type="checkbox"/> Audio Speech         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Magazine   | <input type="checkbox"/> Other         |   |

## 2. Unique Physical Qualities of the Item (Check one or more)

- |   |   |                                      |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interesting Letterhead | <input type="checkbox"/> Notations      | <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Artwork                | <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking Style | <input type="checkbox"/> Typed       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Images                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Cartoons       | <input type="checkbox"/> Seals       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Date                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Other          |                                      |

3. Dates of Item: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Author (or creator) of the Item: \_\_\_\_\_

Position (Title): \_\_\_\_\_

5. For what audience was the item created?

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6. How credible (or reliable) is this source? (Check one)

- Very                       Reasonably                       Questionable                       Not at all

## 7. Item Information

A. List three things about the item that you think are important.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

B. Why do you think this item was created? What purpose does it serve?

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C. What evidence in the item helps you know why it was written? Quote from the material or discuss the image.

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D. What kind of language / imagery does this item use to make its point? Why would the author/creator make those kinds of choices?

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E. List two things the item tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.

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F. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the item.

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G. How might this document be useful to historians?

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