Chapter 23: The 1920s

Overview

Post World War I America was prosperous. The 1920s offered plentiful jobs, soaring incomes, and a host of new consumer goods. Industrial development contributed to the dominance of corporations that reshaped work and the workforce. But not everything was positive. Organized labor and farmers suffered. Modern attitudes, pleasure, leisure, and consumption became aspects of a new American way of life. These new lifestyles also extolled the old values of individualism. The increasingly organized society blended elements of the old and new. Despite the perception that the economic gains of the 1920s improved the lives of all Americans, there were many who did not benefit from the prosperity. In 1928, six out of ten American families made less than the $2000 a year necessary for just the “basic needs of life.” Many Americans defined their lives in terms of pleasure, leisure, consumption, and narrowly defined individualism. Some were artists and intellectuals; others wanted America to return to its rural old values. For African-Americans and Mexican-Americans the 1920s did little to eradicate racial barriers. The decade of the 1920s witnessed the full emergence of the modern political system characterized by advertising, weak parties, and low voter turnout. The Republican party controlled the executive branch during the decade and they supported minimal government involvement in the nation’s political economy and less internationalist foreign policy. What was touted as “new” was really a return to the old way of doing things.

Key Topics The information in chapter 23 introduces your students to the following key topics:
- The impact of the continuing transformation of the industrial economy on big business, work, organized labor, farmers, and urban growth.
- The emergence of a more secular modern culture, dedicated to pleasure, leisure, and consumerism.
- The importance of individualism and new individual identities in the modern culture.
- The widespread but unsuccessful backlash against the modern culture.
- The Republicans’ dominance of the emerging system of modern politics.

Chapter Outline

The Queen of the Swimmers

A Dynamic Economy
- The Development of Industry
- The Trend Toward Large-Scale Organization
- The Transformation of Work and the Work Force
- The Defeat of Organized Labor
- The Decline of Agriculture
- The Urban Nation

A Modern Culture
- The Spread of Consumerism
- New Pleasures
- A Sexual Revolution
- Changing Gender Ideals
- The Family and Youth
- The Celebration of the Individual

Feature: Focus on Youth: “Flaming Youth” on Campus

The Limits of the Modern Culture
- The “Lost Generation” of Intellectuals
- Fundamentalist Christians and ‘Old-Time Religion’
- Nativists and Immigration Restriction
- The Rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan
- Mexican-Americans
- African Americans and the “New Negro”
Annotated chapter outline with review questions

The Queen of Swimmers: Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to swim the English Channel. Only five men had accomplished the feat that Ederle accomplished in record-setting time on August 1926. American newspapers heralded her accomplishment, President Coolidge sent her a congratulatory note, and Ederle was contracted to endorse products and appear on stage and in the movies. She typified post World War I America. It was a great time to be an American.

A Dynamic Economy: Post World War I America was prosperous. The 1920s offered plentiful jobs, soaring incomes, and a host of new consumer goods. Industrial development contributed to the dominance of corporations that reshaped work and the workforce. But not everything was positive. Organized labor and farmers suffered. More efficient production methods and increased productivity shaped the development of the American economy in the 1920s. The nation’s industries shifted from coal to electricity. Mass production, electrification, and other innovations increased American productivity and established industries flourished while new industries developed. Industrial development contributed to the trend toward large-scale organization so basic to American capitalism. Mergers during the 1920s consolidated more and more businesses and assets in the hands of fewer and fewer American corporations reorganized for changes in consumer demand.

- The nature of work and the workforce changed during the 1920s. The science of management continued to sweep through American industry. Speed and efficiency were linked to production and profits. The assembly line might speed up production but it also made workers unsatisfied. Ford Motor Company’s turnover rate in 1913 was 380 percent. Women also moved into the workforce despite discrimination and beliefs that women should not work outside the home.
- The American labor movement did not respond well to these changes in the work force and the nature of work. The effect was that workers became less organized in the 1920s and union membership dropped. Prosperity, employer intimidation, weak union leadership, and the fact that strikes during the decade brought about little or no positive change contributed to labor’s failures.
- Although the 1920s were not prosperous years for farmers, they faced similar problems as in other American industries: the number of farms dropped because some farmers abandoned the business and because smaller farms were bought up and consolidated into huge “factories in the fields”. Agricultural corporations could afford to employ new and better machines, irrigation systems, and other industrialized procedures. Bumper crops and overproduction caused farm prices to drop. Farmers looked to the federal government for help but they did not have the clout necessary for their concerns to become part of the Republican legislative agenda.
- For the first time more Americans lived in an urban setting rather than in a rural location. The industrial economy drew workers from the country and declining farm prices pushed them off of the farm. In urban areas another shift was occurring as affluent city dwellers moved out of the city to what was called the suburbs. This shift was enabled by the automobile. The transformation of the countryside into suburban developments was a powerful symbol of the emergence of the urban nation.

A Modern Culture: Modernity, pleasure, leisure, and consumption became aspects of a new American way of life. This new lifestyle also extolled the old values of individualism. The increasingly organized society blended elements of the old and new.
Higher wages and more leisure time contributed to the changes but so, too, did an attitudinal change that diminished the virtues of hard work. Pleasure was the antidote to unsatisfying work. Advertising also contributed to consumerism. Change and innovation were positive attitudes. Installment purchase plans encouraged Americans to buy now and pay later. Consumer debt more than doubled between 1920 and 1929.

Spectator sports, movies, a new form of music, jazz, the radio gave Americans seemingly limitless access to leisure activities. These were also new industries which became part of the growing American entertainment industry. Radio and the movie industry played key roles in disseminating the values of consumerism.

The 1920s also saw a pronounced change in Americans’ attitudes about sex. A sexual revolution was underway. Movies and songs explored sexual topics and reinforced a change in attitude that suggested that sexual pleasure was a necessary and desirable part of human life, particularly marriage. Attitudes toward birth control also changed. Sex education and access to contraceptives were no longer topics for the political radicals. A corresponding shift in public opinion also occurred on the topic of premarital sex.

New gender ideals changed alongside attitudinal changes about sex. The assertive, independent “New Woman” emerged claiming a right to attend school, vote, and have a career. In the 1920s the New Woman was also a sexual being. Although many Americans were not willing to support full equality with men, the feminists of the 1920s commanded a great deal of attention. Ideas about masculinity also changed in the 1920s although not as drastically as ideas about feminism.

Family life in the 1920s changed, too. No longer critical to economic production, the family changed to become a unit of leisure and consumption rather than a unit of production. Family size decreased, due in part to birth control, but also because smaller families enabled the members to concentrate more time and money on each other.

All of these changes symbolize another change for Americans: the importance of the individual, his and her accomplishments, satisfaction, and freedom were basic to consumerism. The veneration of sports figures and movie stars, is part of the importance of the individual in American society in the 1920s. The paradox of American society by the 1920s is that the development of industrial capitalism intensified the importance of both individuals and organizations at the same time.

How did views of sexuality, gender, family, and youth change in the 1920s? Why was individualism so important to the modern culture?

What were the fundamental values of the modern culture that emerged by the 1920s? Why did this culture emerge?

The Limits of the Modern Culture: Despite the perception that the economic gains of the 1920s improved the lives of all Americans, there were many who did not benefit from the prosperity. In 1928, six out of ten American families made less than the $2000 a year necessary for just the “basic needs of life”. Many Americans defined their lives in terms of pleasure, leisure, consumption, and narrowly defined individualism. Some were artists and intellectuals others wanted America to return to its rural old values. For African-Americans and Mexican-Americans the 1920s did little to eradicate racial barriers.

For a number of artists and intellectuals, mostly white and male, the 1920s caused them to feel alienated, some because the nation had changed too much and others because it had not changed enough. Many were effected by their World War I experiences. They have come to be called the “Lost Generation”. It is not that their work set off a reaction to changes of the 1920s instead their work reflects an ambivalence and uneasiness. Although it was not coordinated or unified, their work provided an agenda for Americans as they came to terms with modern consumer society in the decades to come.

The changes of the 1920s caused many Americans of faith to question the new modern society. The secular nature of the new culture was troubling but more so was a change in philosophy in American Protestant denominations. Science and scholarship had influenced many peoples’ thinking and those liberal thinkers and theologians were attacked by fundamentalists who believed in the literal truth of the Bible. Their position came to be called “old-time” religion. The conflict between the two positions was played out in a courtroom in Tennessee in 1925. John Scopes, a biology teacher, was charged with teaching evolution, which was in violation of a state statute that made it illegal to teach any theory that
denied divine creation. The hostility between fundamentalists and liberal Protestants was not diminished by the trial.

- Another area of strife in America in the 1920s was immigration and many Americans advocated a return to a time when the nation’s population was more homogenous. The nativists’ fears were enhanced by several preconceived notions: the immigrants would bring their revolutionary beliefs and practices to the United States and their presence would “degrade the American race.” Their fears motivated Congress to drastically reduce the number of immigrants allowed into the United States and restricted the nations from which immigrants could come.

- Nativism and fundamentalism also encouraged the growth of the Ku Klux Klan which had been reborn in 1915. Racist hatred of African-Americans was at the core of the Klan’s members’ rhetoric but the new Klan of the 1920s included Jews, Roman Catholics, immigrants, religious liberals, and any one who advocated change from the old way. Klan membership flourished in the 1920s; members came from all regions of the nation, urban and rural, and all classes. It, too, was a reaction to social change and the modernization of American society.

- Changes in the immigration laws created a shortage of low skilled low wage workers in the United States at a time when political upheaval and changes in agriculture in Mexico caused hundreds of thousands of Mexicans to look north for opportunity. Between 1890 and 1929 perhaps one and one half million Mexicans immigrated first to the agricultural regions of the southwest and then further north to factory jobs in American cities. Mexican immigrants wrestled with the same problems as other immigrant groups. Many were segregated by law into barrios but they were still bombarded by advertising and consumerism. Instead of abandoning their traditional cultures they adapted Mexican culture with American culture. By the end of the 1920s some Mexican immigrants organized themselves into the Federation of Mexican Workers Union and the League of United Latin American Citizens.

- In many ways African Americans’ lives changed radically but hardly changed at all. Although white Americans listened to jazz and visited black night clubs, racism was not dead. Segregation, either by law or custom, was still the norm and blacks’ rights to vote denied. The 1920s saw the “New Negro” who celebrated his and her racial difference from the rest of society. The Harlem Renaissance brought a birth of black creativity as writers and artists explored what it meant to be black in America. The NAACP became increasingly aggressive in its legal assaults on racism. Middle-class African Americans were supportive of the NAACP while lower working class blacks found an encouraging message in Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Why was there such a widespread backlash against the modern culture of the 1920s? Why did the backlash fail?

A “New Era” in Politics and Government: The decade of the 1920s witnessed the full emergence of the modern political system characterized by advertising, weak parties, and low voter turn out. The Republican party controlled the executive branch during the decade and they supported minimal government involvement in the nation’s political economy and less internationalist foreign policy. What was touted as “new” was really a return to the old way of doing things.

- The political parties had lost control of the nation’s political culture. Newspapers, which had once been partisan were now objective and competed with radio and the movies which had no political affiliations. Political parties relied instead on educating the electorate about the issues and using advertising techniques to get their message to the voters. Voter turnout in the 1920s was low perhaps because the new information-based campaign style appealed just to the elite.

- Progressive reform, which relied on Americans’ fears and dislike of corporations, also declined. In part, Americans had come to oppose government activism, which was vital for progressive reform. Ironically the success of women’s suffrage also played a part in the decline of progressivism. No longer united behind one issue, women supported a variety of causes, some of which were in opposition to one another. Women were also divided over the race issue in the 1920s. No longer a unified political force to be dealt with, the male-dominated Congress was unmoved when the issue was a female one, such as maternity leave.

- The decline of progressivism benefited the Republican Party. Warren G. Harding was elected in 1920 with an amazing 60 percent of the vote. He had promised a return to normalcy following the innovations
of the Progressives and the disruptions of World War I. And although Harding’s short time in office was known for its scandals they did not hurt Harding’s vice president Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge, who became president in 1923 when Harding died, was elected in 1924. Controlling the White House and the Congress the Republicans were in their ascendancy.

- The Republicans practiced the politics of individualism. They supported a political economy driven by individualist values and minimalist government. They praised business and consumerism and raised the tariff and developed the nation’s transportation network. They pledged to reduce government expenses and reduce the national debt.

- One of the other casualties of the progressive era was a strong American presence in foreign affairs. Following World War I an active international peace movement was popular and the United States participated in a number of international conferences devoted to disarmament. The Republicans preferred to focus their attention on domestic issues as well as economic development although this latter issue complicated the administrations’ lack of focus on foreign policy. Harding and Coolidge withdrew American troops from several Central American countries only to send them back when conditions destabilized.

- Americans supported the limited policies of the Republican party. The Democrats were unsuccessful in finding a candidate that could beat the Republicans and they could not keep their coalition of fundamentalists, nativists, and Klansmen. They did support Al Smith and a platform of government action to solve social and economic programs. But Smith’s Irish Catholic heritage was an insurmountable obstacle. Voters supported Herbert Hoover who won the largest electoral victory of the 1920s. The Republicans also controlled even more seats in the House and Senate.

**Why did the Republican Party dominate the emerging political system of the 1920s? How did Republican policies reflect the economic and cultural changes of the decade?**

**Feature: Focus on Youth: “Flaming Youth on Campus:”** No population in the United States typified the notion of “flaming youth” than America’s college and university campuses. At school young collegiates were free from parental control and supervision and students created their own version of the new culture of leisure and pleasure, including sexual pleasure. They fostered a comfort with individualism while they also became more comfortable with organizational constraints. Conformity, individualism, freedom, and organization characterized these young Americans.

**Conclusion:** When Herbert Hoover was elected in 1928 it seemed as if the incredible economic growth of the 1920s would continue forever. Americans had come to equate human happiness with the capacity to pay for pleasures. Despite its detractors economic prosperity and all it offered American society seemed never-ending.

**Making links to other ideas** Using the maps and websites, in addition to your prepared lectures and other assignments, can give you more resources to enable your students to see that history is much more than memorizing names and dates. You will find that the websites are even more comprehensive and adaptable than described and because they have been collected here in one volume you have a world of information no further away than the click of your mouse. If you are new to the web’s opportunities, you will be pleasantly surprised at the breadth and depth of the information available in these sites.

Map 01. Which states did Al Smith carry? What was it about his campaign that southerners in these states liked about him? Why could Herbert Hoover not carry those states, too?


**Web connections and resources** Consider using these websites to supplement your students’ reading and analytical skills. The sites were chosen because of their relevance to the material in the chapter — not just to mirror it but to provide additional materials and perspectives. Questions from the student study guide have been included so that you can use or amend them to your own needs. Your students may find it insightful for you to guide them through the site as you help them develop research strategies.
The Harlem Renaissance represents a flowering of African-American achievement in music, poetry, painting, photography, and the other arts. An extraordinary number of talented people gathered in Harlem in the 1920s. They enriched each other’s art as well as American culture at large. Yet the Renaissance is not simply a story of individual and group achievement. It is also a powerful instance of innumerable obstacles African Americans, even those of great genius, faced. The poet Countee Cullen asked: “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: To make a poet black, and bid him sing!”

1. In what ways did the Harlem Renaissance effect African Americans living in places other than Harlem?  
2. What experiences did many of the Harlem Renaissance artists have in common? Was racism and bigotry part of their shared experience?

This site chronicles the changing popular culture of the 1920s in areas such as fashion, entertainment, and language.

1. How did fashion styles of the 1920s reflect the social changes of the times?  
2. In what ways did movie stars, radio drama, and advertising make consumption, leisure, and pleasure desirable?

This site is a compilation of numerous primary sources—from mass advertising and presidential addresses to short films. It tracks the nation’s transition to a consumer society and examines the role of the government in that change. It also discusses life for those who did not enjoy the emerging fruits of the economy.

1. In what ways did Calvin Coolidge’s administration encourage consumerism and the growth of American business?  
2. Rural poverty in America was characterized by . . .  
3. African-Americans, especially those who lived in urban areas, responded to the era of consumerism by . . .

This site details the famous legal battle, which testifies to the challenges to tradition that were prevalent in the 1920s. The site includes eyewitness accounts, excerpts from the trial, photographs, and more.

1. Summarize the trial issues.  
2. Summarize the bigger social issues represented by the Scopes trial.  
3. Why were so many Americas, in Dayton, in Tennessee, and in the United States, so interested in this trial?

The historical 1925 e-text of the Survey Graphic, a journal of social work, featured on this site is an example of one of the first attempts to understand the social, cultural, and political significance of the Harlem community in New York.

1. What kind of magazine and readership did Survey Graphic serve?  
2. What do the readers’ reviews have to say about this issue on the Harlem Renaissance?  
3. Do you think that the fact that the magazine featured African Americans in Harlem in a special issue means that the concerns of black Americans had finally come to the attention of white social scientists? Explain your answer and cite specific examples to support your position.

Explore the subject of immigration of Mexican Americans to America. Through this site, learn about their lives in the barrios in California and their struggle for a better life through mutual aid and work.
Analytical reading  Your students may need more experience analyzing a short reading passage so that he or she can determine its component parts. They may need help identifying primary and supporting information as well as the author’s analysis. The analytical reading passages and the questions from the student study guide have been duplicated in the instructor’s manual for your use. Your students may need direction and encouragement in using them.

The Klan’s tactics were a blend of old and new. Seeing themselves as an army of secret vigilantes, some Klan members supported the age-old tactics of moral regulation -- intimidation, flogging, sometime lynching -- in order to scare people into good behavior. At the same time, much of the “Invisible Empire” repudiated violence and used the latest advertising techniques to boost its membership.

For several years, the Klan’s potent combination of old and new elements proved extraordinarily successful. At its peak, the organization enrolled perhaps 3 to 5 million secret members. Its power reached much further. Because so many politicians sympathized with the Klan or feared its power, the organization had considerable political influence in such states as Ohio, Indiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, Georgia, Texas, California, and Oregon. Working with both major parties, the order helped to elect governors, senators, and other officials.

1. What does the increased membership of the Klan in the 1920s say about Americans’ sense of security about contemporary America?

2. Does the power of the Klan reflect the power of its members or the power of its philosophies?

Writing  The questions or writing prompts from the student study guide have been duplicated here for your use. These writing topics make good lecture topics especially if you help your students see the development of the idea in lecture format before they refine the idea in their writing assignments.

1. What was the effect of economic change in the 1920s on American corporations? American workers? the nature of American work? the labor movement? American farmers?

2. In what ways did the growth of the American economy of the 1920s contribute to the development of a more secular modern culture?

3. Social and economic change caused many more traditional and conservative Americans to turn their back on the modernism of the 1920s. In what ways did these Americans try to eliminate or derail these changes?

4. What accounts for the emergence and dominance of the Republican party in the 1920s? Why could the Democrat party not come up with either a winning candidate or winning platform?

Lecture Strategies  Ultimately the lecture is where you impart, or profess, your knowledge for the benefit of your students. These strategies were designed around the textbook and if your classroom strategy is to use the organization of the text to organize your course content, these lecture ideas may prove helpful. However, if you lecture around themes please see the section entitled “Thematic Lecture Topics.” You may find that you are more comfortable with and your students are more responsive to a combination of the two.

Whether it is the growth of consumerism, advertising and marketing, or the technological advances of the day, the economic growth of the 1920s provides you with a variety of topics for lectures. Whichever you choose, remember to help your students see the connection between the advances and the consolidation of business in the hands of the few.

The Jazz Age, the flapper, and this incredible zeal for having a good time can be seen as a reaction to the horrors of World War I and the demands of the progressive era. Were Americans running toward the future or away from the past?

The conservative backlash of the 1920s also illustrates just how powerful the messages and cultural change of the 1920s was. Again we have Americans desperately trying to hold on to the world they know and are comfortable with rather than embrace the new.

That the Republican party capitalized on these attitudes, and business profited from them being in office, is another hallmark of the 1920s. That no one paid attention to the plight of American farmers, who had over-extended and over-produced for the war, is an obvious glimpse into the future.
Penguin Classics


In Immigrant Voices: Twenty-four Narratives on Becoming an American, edited by Gordon Hunter, New York: A Signet Classic, 1999, Etsu Sugimoto records the emotional conflicts she experienced as both a Japanese and American women in this excerpt from her first novel, A Daughter of the Samarai, written in 1926. See also Claude McKay’ A Long Way Home. McKay was a Jamaican writer who lived in Harlem. This excerpt describes a meeting between McKay and a possible benefactor who is white.