CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: THE TWENTIES, 1920–1929

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KEY TOPICS
*A second industrial revolution that transforms the economy
*The promise and limits of prosperity in the 1920s
*New mass media and the culture of consumption
*Republican Party dominance
*Political and cultural opposition to modern trends

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: THE MOVIE AUDIENCE AND HOLLYWOOD In the 1920s, the movies were American’s most popular form of the new mass culture. A huge, national audience regularly attended movies in grand, majestic theaters. The production center for this dream world was Hollywood, California. A frontier boom town, dominated by the movie stars
who lived opulent lives, Hollywood symbolized Americans’ dreams of freedom, material success, and the chance to remake one’s very identity. The vignette shows how the movies helped forge a national community whose collective goals were based on these symbols.

**POSTWAR PROSPERITY AND ITS PRICE** The economy underwent a transformation during the 1920s. A second industrial revolution took hold. Driven by electricity and automated machinery, industry concentrated on producing consumer goods. A housing boom further drove the economy. A managerial revolution stressed scientific management and behavioral psychology. Successful corporations worked to integrate production and distribution, diversify products, and expand industrial research as they attempted to gain control of entire industries. Increasingly, a class of salaried executives rather than stockholders made corporate policy. To improve worker morale and reduce the challenge of unions, corporations employed “welfare capitalism” that provided a variety of benefits. To undercut unions, businesses promoted an “open shop” in which non-union workers received the same benefits as union workers. Union membership rapidly declined and the AFL showed no interest in organizing workers in the new industries. The courts also adopted a pro-business stance.

The automobile symbolized the rise of the consumer economy. By 1925, the assembly line at Henry Ford’s Highland Park plant completed a car every 10 seconds. Ford paid his workers more than the going rate, reducing turnover while enabling them to be both producers and consumers of his Model T. The car cost $300—three month’s wages. General Motors pursued a strategy based on diversified auto lines and financing. The auto industry spurred production of steel, rubber, glass, and petroleum. Road building triggered commercial development along highways, promoted new businesses, and changed social habits. It enabled people to move into suburbs, which were rapidly expanding. Cities also grew at a fast pace, not only horizontally, but also vertically as new buildings reshaped the skyline.

Despite the boom in business, many workers and farmers suffered. Agricultural profits steadily declined and the gap between farm and nonfarm income widened. Coolidge vetoed efforts to aid farmers, suffering from debts incurred during wartime expansion. Other industries included coal mining—which faced competition from oil and natural gas; railroads—which faced competition from cars and trucks; and New England textiles—which faced competition from low-wage southern producers.

**THE NEW MASS CULTURE** Mass communication media reshaped American culture in the 1920s. Movie ticket sales soared. The Hollywood studios dominated business. Publicists whetted American appetites by creating an elegant image for movie stars. Attacked by conservative groups for sexual permissiveness, Hollywood studios came up with a plan of self-censorship by hiring Will Hayes as a morals czar. Radio developed from a small, growing industry of interest to the military, the telephone companies, and amateur “ham” operators into the nation’s first comprehensive mass entertainment medium. Large companies formed national networks that aired a variety of programs to homes across the country. Building on blackface minstrelsy, “Amos ‘n’ Andy” was the first national radio hit show. Radio also helped to commercialize previously isolated forms of music and build a mass following for sports. The 1920s saw the growth of newspaper tabloids that emphasized crime, sex scandals, gossip columns, and sports. Their popularity forced advertisers to appeal directly to working class and immigrant readers. As
in other businesses, journalism saw the trend towards consolidation. The Hearst chain controlled 14 percent of the nation’s circulation.

Advertising became a thriving industry that promoted consumerism. Advertising agencies employed market research and psychology to stress consumer needs, desires, and anxieties rather than the qualities of the product. They celebrated consumption as a positive good. Fueled in part by dance crazes, the recording industry transformed American mass and regional popular culture. Spectator sports reached unprecedented popularity. Athletes took on a celebrity status. Babe Ruth’s home run hitting and appetite for publicity helped restore baseball’s tarnished image as it recovered from the 1919 Black Sox scandal. Attendance soared, prompting newspapers and radio stations to broaden their coverage. Although African Americans were excluded from major league baseball, the Negro National League (organized in 1920) provided new opportunities.

For some people the 1920s saw a new morality symbolized by the flapper who danced to jazz, smoked cigarettes, drank bootleg liquor, and was sexually active. A growing number of serious writers had encouraged a greater degree of openness about sexuality. Advertisers and movie stars used sex to promote a mass culture. Surveys of sexual behavior show that an increased number of women had sexual relations prior to marriage. The new morality was reflected in American popular culture.

**THE STATE, THE ECONOMY, AND BUSINESS** Warren G. Harding presided over the nation during the early 1920s. He surrounded himself with his Ohio cronies and ran an administration riddled with scandal. Led by Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon, his administration pursued policies that trimmed the budget and reduced the taxes paid by the wealthy. Harding’s death in 1923 brought stern, but honest, Calvin Coolidge to office. Coolidge continued the business-government partnership of Harding’s term. He spent only four hours a day at work, but reduced federal spending, cut taxes, and blocked congressional initiatives. Herbert Hoover was the most influential figure during the period, serving as secretary of commerce under Harding and Coolidge. He promoted business cooperation by creating trade associations and coordinating conferences to promote business efficiency. This facilitated the growing concentration of corporate wealth.

The United States emerged from WWI as the strongest economic power and as the world’s most important creditor. American officials insisted that former allies pay back the money they had borrowed during the war, though they reduced payments in the late 1920s and earlier helped the Germans refinance their reparations debt. Although the United States did not join the League of Nations, it did participate in naval disarmament conferences, arms reduction agreements, joined the World Court, and took other symbolic steps towards world peace. The ultimate foreign policy goal, however, remained economic expansion. Business and government collaborated to expand United States investments and markets overseas, particularly in Latin America.

**RESISTANCE TO MODERNITY** Rural and small-town Americans were distressed by the growing power of urban culture. Many looked to prohibition as a way to restore public morality, but public demand for alcohol remained strong. This encouraged illegal bootlegging and a battle between “wets” and “drys” over the merits of the law. Bootlegging provided a great boost to
organized crime, which became a permanent feature of American life. Dating back to the late
nineteenth century, the movement to restrict immigration of southern and eastern Europeans
accelerated in the twenties. Back by old-stock American beliefs in racial inferiority and fueled by
wartime patriotism, the Red Scare, nativist sentiment, legislation passed that set quotas on annual
immigration.

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was the most effective nativist organization. Although he
portrayed the Klan as the defender of traditional values, Hiram W. Evans transformed it into a
mass movement by using modern promotional techniques. It attacked not only blacks but
Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. It claimed over 3 million members and was a powerful force in
Democratic Party politics not only in the South but in several western and midwestern states. In
1925, the Klan began to fade, in part due to a sex scandal that discredited the one of its leaders.
Religious fundamentalism paralleled political nativism. Fundamentalists rejected the tenets of
modern science, particularly evolution. Five states banned its teaching in public schools. William
Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow squared off in a celebrated trial in Dayton, Tennessee over
teaching evolution.

PROMISES POSTPONED Prosperity and progress were unevenly distributed. Women,
Mexican Americans, African Americans, and intellectuals were some of the groups troubled by
societal trends. Once suffrage was gained, women’s rights advocates faced a dilemma. Should
they press for protective legislation or push for legal and civil equality? The National American
Woman Suffrage Association reorganized itself as the League of Women Voters and promoted
women’s involvement in politics and laws protecting women and children. A smaller, more
militant group, Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party, opposed protective legislation and pushed
for the Equal Rights Amendment. The debate centered on whether women would benefit more
from eliminating legal restrictions or from maintaining special protections. Women continued to
enter white-collar professions, though men still dominated the high-paid occupations.

Restrictions on European immigration opened up opportunities to Mexicans, who were not
covered by the laws. Job opportunities in agribusiness attracted Mexican immigrants and
substantial, though segregated Mexican barrios grew up in several urban centers. Mexicans were
frequently barred from high-paying jobs and were targets of racist campaigns. They established
mutual aid societies to assist themselves and to fight for equality.

The 1920s was the era of the “New Negro” and the Harlem Renaissance. African Americans
continued to migrate to northern urban communities. Harlem became a major African-American
cultural center as a wide range of artists explored aspects of black life in new ways. New voices
of black protest emerged in various quarters. Marcus Garvey emphasized black pride, black-
owned businesses, and unity among all people of African dissent. But for all its glitter, most
Harlem residents worked long hours at menial jobs for low pay.

Gertrude Stein described intellectuals of the 1920s as a “lost generation.” Writers like Ernest
Hemingway and John Dos Passos drew on their WWI experiences and expressed cynicism about
society’s goals and purposes. F. Scott Fitzgerald likewise questioned the crass materialism of the
opulent rich. H. L. Mencken mocked the values of small town America, themes echoed in the
writings of Sinclair Lewis. Eugene O’Neill’s plays depicted the darker side of family life and
explored racism. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* used the metaphor of impotence to comment on the postwar world. A group of southern writers known as the Fugitives attacked industrialism and looked to traditional southern society as an alternative to crass materialism.

The presidential election of 1928 was a race between urban, Catholic, wet, Al Smith (Democrat) versus small-town, Protestant, dry, Herbert Hoover (Republican). Smith’s Catholicism was widely attacked. Both sides promised to support business, though Hoover could claim to have been the architect of the 1920s prosperity. Smith lost, but ran strongly in the cities, a harbinger of what lay ahead.

**CONCLUSION** The forces of modernity had transformed America, but many Americans deeply distrusted these changes.

**Lecture Suggestions**

1. Build a lecture around the idea of the “New Era.” Leaders like Herbert Hoover envisioned an economy free from poverty, as a scientifically managed economy would eliminate want. Make the connection between Hoover’s policies and progressivism. Emphasize the continuity between the two eras. Note that the support that the “New Era” enjoyed was based upon continued economic growth—the second industrial revolution, etc. But note also that while the government was promoting business growth, little was done to regulate business or to insure wide dispersal of the era’s benefits. This helped lay the groundwork for the Great Depression.

2. The material on cultural changes is neatly divided into two competing worldviews. Automobiles and the rapid growth of suburbs were part of an emerging consumer culture. Likewise, the growth of advertising, new media, etc. were also indications of the changes that were going on and helping to produce a new morality. Traditional old-stock Protestants were tremendously upset by these changes and enacted immigration restrictions, prohibition, supported the Ku Klux Klan and fundamentalism.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Can you make a connection between the economic policies of the 1920s with those of the progressive period?

2. How did the automobile transform American society? How would people respond to those changes?

3. The text refers to a “new mass culture.” What was it? How would people respond to it?

4. It’s easy to condemn the Ku Klux Klan. But why were people joining it in such large numbers? Can you connect the Ku Klux Klan to other movements of the era?
5. The text describes the debate between feminists who wanted to promote women’s opportunities by passing protective legislation and those favoring the equal rights amendment. Who do you think has the better argument?

6. Make the connection between Marcus Garvey and the previously discussed African-American leaders, Washington and DuBois. Would Garvey seem closer to one than the other? (Note that most students assume he was closer to DuBois. But note that Garvey saw himself as a disciple of Washington and that he emphasized black self-sufficiency, and feuded bitterly with DuBois.)

Out of Class Activity

This could be a good place to connect history and literature. Students could examine the major writers of the period and trying to connect what they were saying to the trends in their society. The text refers to writers such as Hemingway, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Stein, and Eliot. Don’t neglect black writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston. Students could report to the class the extent to which the writers reflected the direction of social change and the extent to which they criticized their society.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject

Ellis Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order* (St. Martin’s 2nd edition, 1992) does an excellent job of laying out the relationship between government and the economy during the 1920s. It lays the groundwork for the upcoming depression.

Audio-Visual Aids

“Henry Ford’s America” Traces the development of the Ford auto industry from its beginnings through 1977. Examines the automobile’s impact on American society. (Color, 57 minutes, 1977).

“The Great Air Race of 1924” from PBS “The American Experience” Recounts the attempt of four biplanes to circle the globe. (Color, 1990, 60 minutes)

“From These Roots” Documents the artistic, social, and political renaissance of African-Americans during the 1920s. Focuses on Harlem. (B&W, 29 minutes, 1974).