Chapter 23: The 1920s

Overview

Post-World War I America was prosperous. Jobs were plentiful, incomes soared, and a host of new consumer goods were available. But not everything was positive. Organized labor and farmers suffered. 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. The decade of the 1920s witnessed the full emergence of the modern political system characterized by advertising, weak parties, and low voter turnout.

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

Review Questions

✓ What were the causes of the transformation of the industrial economy in the 1910s and 1920s? How did that transformation benefit or harm different economic groups such as big business, workers, and farmers?
✓ 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?
✓ Why was there such a widespread backlash against the modern culture of the 1920s? Why did the backlash fail?
✓ 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?

Annotated chapter outline

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 in 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. Industrial development contributed to the dominance of corporations that reshaped work and the workforce. More efficient production methods and increased productivity shaped the development of the American economy. Mergers consolidated more and more businesses and assets in the hands of fewer and fewer.

• The science of management continued to sweep through American industry. Speed and efficiency were linked to production and profits. Women moved into the work force despite discrimination.
• The American labor movement did not respond well to these changes in the work force and the nature of work. 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.
• Farmers faced similar problems: 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.” 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 rather than 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.

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.
• Higher wages, more leisure time, and an attitudinal change that diminished the virtues of hard
work changed Americans’ views of work. Change and innovation were positive attitudes.
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. Americans’ attitudes about sex changed, too. 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.
• 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. 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 symbolized another change for
Americans: the importance of the individual, his and her accomplishments, satisfaction, and
freedom were basic to consumerism.

The Limits of the Modern Culture: There were many Americans 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 narrowly defined individualism. Artists, intellectuals, and
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 affected by their World War I experiences.
• The changes of the 1920s caused many Americans of faith to question the new modern society.
The hostility between fundamentalists and liberal Protestants was not diminished by the Scopes
trial.
• Another area of strife in America was immigration and many Americans advocated a return to a
time when the nation’s population was more homogenous. Congress reduced the number of
immigrants allowed into the United States and restricted the nations from which immigrants
could come.
• Membership in the Ku Klux Klan grew. Racist hatred of African Americans was at the core of
the Klan’s members’ rhetoric but the new Klan targeted Jews, Roman Catholics, immigrants,
religious liberals, and any one who advocated change from the old way.
• 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. 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. Racism was not dead. Segregation, either by law or custom, was still the norm and blacks’ rights to vote denied. The Harlem Renaissance brought a birth of black creativity as writers and artists explored what it meant to be black in America. The NAACP and other groups became increasingly aggressive in its legal assaults on racism.

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 turnout. The Republican party controlled the executive branch and they supported minimal government involvement in the nation’s political economy and less internationalist foreign policy.

• The political parties lost control of the nation’s political culture. Political parties relied on educating the electorate about the issues and using advertising techniques to get their message to the voters. Voter turnout was low, perhaps because the new information-based campaign style appealed just to the elite.

• Progressive reform declined and that benefited the Republican Party. By 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. The Republicans preferred to focus their attention on domestic issues as well as economic development.

• Americans supported the limited policies of the Republican party. The Democrats were unsuccessful in finding a candidate that could beat the Republicans.

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.

Analytical reading These questions refer to the passage “The Rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan” on pages 557-558.

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?

Lecture Strategies

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 embracing 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.
Supplements:  Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students’ comprehension and performance.

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 woman in this excerpt from her first novel, A Daughter of the Samarai, written in 1926. See also Claude McKay’s 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.


Documents Collection see Part Twenty-Three: The 1920s and Modern America

*J. Grimke, “Address of Welcome to the Men Who Have Returned from the Battlefront” 1919
*The Sahara of the Bozart 1920
*Comprehensive Immigration Law 1924
*National Origins Quota Act, 1924
*Advertisements 1925, 1927
*Family Planning 1926
   Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Court Statement 1927

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk, although previous and subsequent parts have relevant documents.