The 1920s: Era Overview

DISCovering U.S. History, 1997

Prosperity

The Jazz Age. The Roaring Twenties. The Lawless Decade. The Era of Wonderful Nonsense. The Boom. These labels pasted on the 1920s distort that decade: all such convenient labels are misleading just because they are convenient. For most all Americans the 1920s were not a ten-year debauch fueled by easy money and bootleg booze. Prosperity did not reach coal miners who earned between 75¢ and 85¢ an hour or public-school teachers who averaged between $970 and $1,200 per year [Though it is impossible to convert the purchasing power of 1920s dollars to 1990s dollars, the miners' 85¢ in 1920 might be worth $8.50 today, although the different income tax rates of each time period would alter that figure]. Farmers never regained their wartime prosperity; farm acreage decreased as four million Americans left farms during the 1920s. Prosperity did not embrace American blacks, 85 percent of whom lived in the segregated South in 1920--mostly in rural locations--and 23 percent of whom were illiterate. They were cut off from opportunity in the land of opportunity.

Normalcy

The serious side of the 1920s was as characteristic of the times as were the frivolities. The business-success ethic was widely accepted. Warren G. Harding declared that Americans wanted "not nostrums, but normalcy." He was right. Normalcy became the motto for a decade of abnormality. Calvin Coolidge stated that "The business of America is business." Herbert Hoover declared: "We in America are nearer to the final triumph over poverty, than ever before in the history of any land.... Given a chance to go forward with the policies of the last eight years, we shall soon with the help of God be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation." In 1922 Sinclair Lewis depicted the American businessman George F. Babbitt, whose name became synonymous with cultural and spiritual poverty. Nonetheless, most Americans aspired to Babbitt's material comforts.

Disillusionment

It was a postwar decade, and, as is often the result of extended wars, the victors were disillusioned by the peace. Americans of the 1920s wanted no further involvements with Europe's problems. American participation in the League of Nations was defeated, and noble causes became suspect--especially foreign causes. The Russian Revolution was hailed as a great humanitarian event by some intellectuals, but most Americans regarded the Bolsheviks as menaces to The American Way or as ridiculous figures. Idealism--political, social or economic--was a luxury or a joke. The "noble experiment" of Prohibition was unenforceable and spawned the rackets.

Change

All was not business as usual. There were marked social changes, especially for women. Not only could women vote, they could smoke, drink, wear comfortable clothes, become educated, show their legs, and participate in a limited amount of sexual freedom. Birth control was openly discussed but not widely available to the working classes. As expressed in "Ain't We Got Fun" (1921): "The rich get richer, and the poor get children." The term Flaming Youth implied not just an irresponsible, celebratory response to life: it expressed the revolt of the younger generation (that is, the generation
after the war generation) against the standards and values of their elders. But youthful ebullience required money—parental money. Like so many of what have come to be regarded as defining qualities of the 1920s, the hedonistic conduct of the “flappers” and their “sheiks” was an upper-middle-class phenomenon. Despite the message of the hit song of 1927, the best things in life were not free.

**Heroes**

Yet there was a great deal of enduring worth or significance in the 1920s. There was a proliferation of genius, especially in the arts. The best books, music, and paintings of the decade retain their distinction; and their creators have become American cultural icons. The American capacity for hero worship found ready expression in sports, but the stars of the 1920s have proved to be enduring. The era and its heroes matched each other: Babe Ruth was a quintessential 1920s figure—not a celebrity, but a hero who personified the national mood. All the heroes were not artists or athletes. Every line of endeavor produced great figures: Harvey Williams Cushing, Rueben L. Kahn, George and Gladys Dick in medicine; Robert Goddard, Robert Millikan, and Edwin Hubble in science; Raymond Hood and Albert Kahn in architecture; Margaret Mead in anthropology; Margaret Sanger, Grace Abbott, and Maud Wood Park in social reform. These heroes—some of them immigrants who fulfilled the American Dream of success—embodied the key American quality of aspiration. If a label is required for the 1920s, *The Era of Aspiration* is appropriate. All that genius, talent, energy, confidence, and ambition drove the quest for new, more, bigger, better.

**Big Business**

"Never before, here or anywhere else, has a government been so completely fused with business," declared the *Wall Street Journal*. The 1920s fostered the growth of business and celebrated the men—many of them self-made—who made big business bigger: Walter P. Chrysler, Alfred P. Sloan, A. P. Giannini, Owen D. Young, Donald W. Douglas, David Sarnoff, Herbert Hoover ("The Great Engineer"), William C. Durant, Henry Ford. Although it was difficult for the unions to exercise power during a decade committed to business growth, labor generated its own great figures: John L. Lewis, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, A. Philip Randolph, and Norman Thomas, leader of the United States Socialist Party, acquired respect but not power—especially on campuses—during a Republican decade.

American political activity was undistinguished during the 1920s. The most remarkable event was the Democrats' decision to run Al Smith, an anti-Prohibitionist Roman Catholic, for president in 1928—possibly because Republican Hoover was unbeatable by any Democrat. Hoover broke the Solid South, and Smith did not carry his home state, New York.

**New Blood**

Sports remained segregated. But show business provided opportunities for blacks and Jews. Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart, and Jerome Kern wrote the Broadway songs of the 1920s; Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor performed them, often in blackface. The movie industry was organized by Jews who created the studio system: Jesse Lasky, Adolph Zukor, Marcus Loew, Louis B. Mayer, Carl Laemmle, Samuel Goldwyn, Irving Thalberg, the Warner brothers. American popular culture became increasingly dependent on infusions of new blood from abroad. Another pool of genius had been in place for a century. The jazz of the Jazz Age was black Americans' most powerful influence on American—and ultimately—world culture. Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Duke Ellington did it first; then whites made it pretty or respectable. Blocked from
production or managerial control of music and theater, blacks were among the legendary performers of the era: singers Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters, singer-dancer Josephine Baker, comedian Bert Williams, and a regiment of instrumentalists.

Apart from the most notable figures of the Harlem Renaissance, American writers were white and mainly Protestant. But some of the most innovative and influential literary publishers of the 1920s were not members of the gentile club: Alfred A. Knopf, Bennett Cerf and Donald S. Klopfer (Random House), Horace Liveright, and Richard Simon and M. Lincoln Schuster.

**Mass Communication and Education**

At the same time that America became increasingly urbanized (and suburbanized), communication developments helped to close regional divisions. There were 18.5 million telephones in 1928. Paved roads and affordable cars connected towns with big cities, ultimately killing the small towns. The most effective innovation in mass communication was radio. In 1921 no radios were manufactured in America; by 1929 there were 4,428,000 in production and 10,250,000 in households.

More Americans stayed in school longer. Between 1919 and 1928 college enrollment almost tripled. Of the 919,000 college students in 1928, 356,000 were women. Collegiate lifestyle influenced many aspects of the decade, including fashion, music, slang, and sexual mores. The big man on campus was a figure whose reputation extended off-campus, at least for a year or so.

**Hangovers**

During the 1930s there was an angry reaction against the 1920s and many of its representative figures. The Depression was blamed on the speculative irresponsibility of the boom years. The frivolity of the Jazz Age was condemned by the proletarian decade. Yet much of lasting worth was achieved during the 1920s, especially in the arts and media. Even the frivolity was serious frivolity, for the decade was characterized by satire, wit, and humor. America achieved a level of confidence that faded after 1929, but resurfaced briefly at the end of World War II.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, who christened the Jazz Age, wrote its obituary:

> Now once more the belt is tight and we summon the proper expression of horror as we look back at our wasted youth. Sometimes, though, there is a ghostly rumble among the drums, an asthmatic whisper in the trombones that swings me back into the early twenties when we drank wood alcohol and every day in every way grew better and better, and there was a first abortive shortening of the skirts, and girls all looked alike in sweater dresses, and people you didn't want to know said "Yes, we have no bananas," and it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were--and it all seems rosy and romantic to us who were young then, because we will never feel quite so intensely about our surroundings any more.--"Echoes of the Jazz Age," 1931

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