

The 1920s: Lifestyles and Social Trends: Overview

American Decades

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"The Roaring Twenties."

The 1920s have been dubbed everything from "The Roaring Twenties" and "The Era of Wonderful Nonsense" to "The Decade of the Dollar" and "The Period of the Psyche" to the "Dry Decade" and the age of "Alcohol and Al Capone." Many historians regard the years between World War I and the stock-market crash of 1929 as the culmination of a long process of social change, which Frederick Lewis Allen described as a "revolution in manners and morals."

The Wake of World War I

The 1920s opened in the aftermath of World War I. The war's brutality and devastation in Europe culminated in euphoria at home over the armistice, followed by political controversy over the Treaty of Versailles. While President Woodrow Wilson helped end the war "over there," he claimed Americans did not "want to be coached and led" and as a result offered no organized plan to convert the economy from military mobilization to peace or to incorporate masses of returning veterans into society.

Conversion to Peacetime Economy

In the absence of government planning, conversion to a peacetime economy was abrupt. Veterans poured into the job market and competed with the nine million workers, including many blacks and women, who had advanced because of the economic expansion caused by the war. As government contracts terminated, construction companies planned new buildings and homes, and factories geared up to fill orders for domestic goods. The result was an inflationary boom in 1919, driving up prices and causing massive labor unrest. Food prices rose 84 percent, clothing 114 percent, and furniture 125 percent. Mass-production workers responded with the first general strike in American history.

Strikes of 1919

In the summer and fall of 1919, four million laborers—from East Coast textile workers to nearly all the workforce in Seattle to Chicago's steelworkers and meatpackers—went on strike. These strikes resulted, in large part, from wartime ideology and fears of postwar retrenchment: workers sought to bring America's wartime campaign for democracy in Europe back home to their factories and polling places and to protect their wartime jobs and wages. By the early 1920s this enthusiastic campaign for workers' rights met with almost total defeat. Workers were unable to hold on to their wartime gains or establish collective bargaining agreements.

Labor's Defeat

Labor failed in the 1919 strikes for a variety of reasons. Isolation, ethnic divisions, and internal political conflicts within the labor movement fragmented what should have been unified efforts and thus under-mined workers' goals. Outside the labor movement, the Red Scare—American political fears of Bolshevism and Communism in general after the Russian Revolution of 1917—mobilized forces against organized workers and the entire American Left. Striking workers were defeated by Red Scare terror tactics, combative responses from employers, and fragmentation within their own ranks.

The Red Scare

The 1920s thus opened in a mood of fear and intolerance that would linger through the decade. The Red Scare led to bizarre, hysterical attacks against aliens and alleged Communists. Organizations such as the American Defense Society, the National Security League, and the American Legion led the offensive against radicals and foreigners. Foreign workers from Seattle were sent to Ellis Island for deportation, Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs was imprisoned, and in a policy of "Ship or Shoot," Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer rounded up 249 aliens in December 1919 to be deported on the ship *Buford*, dubbed the "Soviet Ark." In early 1920 thirty-two states passed politically restrictive laws and required teacher loyalty oaths. By the end of 1920 it was clear that no Communist revolution was spreading in Europe or at home, and most of the hysteria was over.

A Revolution in Manners and Morals

A series of profound changes in American life were in place and sharply felt by the 1920s. As novelist Willa Cather commented, "The world broke into two in 1922 or thereabouts." First, between 1880 and World War I, the overall birth rate fell, and the divorce rate increased. In addition, rates of sexual activity both before and outside marriage increased. Finally, greater numbers of working-class women worked outside the home in factories, stores, and offices, and growing numbers of middle-class women attended college and entered professional careers. Grasping these transformations, moralists and social critics feared by the 1920s that the American family was in crisis, and many wondered whether the institution was suited to the new social order at all.

Transformations

Broad patterns of economic and demographic change shaped this transformation in personal behavior. The economy shifted from the industrial model of the nineteenth century to a complex, bureaucratic system shaped by increasingly important corporations. Large-scale corporate capitalism brought prosperity to most of American society in the 1920s. But more laborers now worked for large, impersonal firms, and the new corporate order no longer valued restraint, thrift, and sobriety but instead was oriented toward conformity, consumerism, and individual gratification. In addition, the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, as well as Asia, and the migration of blacks from the rural South to northern cities diversified mainstream

culture. As white middle-class Americans learned dance steps that originated with blacks in Harlem and immigrants mixed with the native-born in urban dance halls and speakeasies, norms that guided the behavior of white middle-class Americans were slowly but permanently transformed.

"Coolidge Prosperity."

This new behavior occurred in the context of the widespread prosperity of the decade. Following a postwar depression in 1920—1921, "Coolidge prosperity"—also known as the "Golden Glow"—gave the country "seven biblical fat years" from 1922 to 1929. In these years the United States amassed two-fifths of the world's wealth. New technology, power resources, and scientific management techniques combined to create the efficient, mechanized production that enabled Henry Ford's company to claim in October 1925 that Ford Industries produced "a complete Model T every ten seconds."

A "People's Car."

Henry Ford envisioned the production of a "people's car." Determined that every one of his workers would be able to buy a Ford automobile, he paid them five dollars a day and lowered the cost of cars until they matched buying power. In the 1920s the Model T Ford became the "family pet of the nation," and a used Model T could be bought for as little as fifty dollars. The Ford got stiff competition from General Motors's Chevrolet, but Henry Ford responded by announcing the new Model A Ford in 1927. Five thousand customers made down payments on Model A's without even seeing one. In spite of Henry Ford's egalitarian dream, in the 1920s automobiles were purchased mostly by the middle and upper classes. Still, by 1929 there were 23.1 million passenger cars in use in the United States, and the privacy and mobility offered by the car would transform the way Americans lived.

Communications

During the 1920s radios, telephones, and motion pictures created mass culture and linked Americans more closely than ever before. In 1922 radio sales reached \$60 million, and by 1929 they had risen 1,400 percent to \$852 million. At the end of the decade a radio could be found in more than half the homes in the country. Coast-to-coast telephone service was in place in 1915, and by 1921, 13 percent of Americans had telephones. The strategy of "One System, One Policy, Universal Service" advanced by Theodore M. Vail, president of American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T), made AT&T the largest corporation in the United States by 1925. The movie industry provided new visual media in the 1920s. The decade saw the Hollywood studio system grow, with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, and Twentieth Century-Fox consolidating control over the distribution and exhibition of their films. In the mid 1920s movies attracted audiences of fifty million per week; by 1930 that figure doubled, and even more people went more often.

Stock-Market Crash

"Can't you see it, smell it? I can see people jumping out of windows on this very street." Fulfilling Sinclair Lewis's prophecy, the "Golden Glow" ended in 1929. The American economy failed to solve its problems of consumption and distribution. Agriculture, construction, and the coal, textile, and railroad industries were in decline, and inventories were building up in cars and durable goods. Businesses encouraged consumers to buy on the installment plan, and by 1929 they had \$6 billion tied up in installment debt. Sixty percent of Americans had annual incomes of less than \$2,000, the estimated minimum needed to maintain a family of four; 70 percent had incomes of less than \$3,000. Corporate profits reached 63 percent, and those of financial institutions rose 150 percent. But on Black Tuesday, 29 October, the stock market crashed, and in the four months that followed \$40 billion was lost. The Great Depression had begun.

Race and Ethnicity

The 1920s were marked by growing racial and ethnic conflict. While professing a pluralist vision that promised to incorporate Americans from different races and ethnic groups into mainstream society, many native-born Americans responded with nativist fear to the increasing cultural diversity. African Americans and Hispanics shared little of the prosperity enjoyed by other Americans in the 1920s. Members of these minorities, many of whom fled to the cities, worked in the sickest industries of the decade and suffered persistent underemployment and unemployment. After 1890 so-called new immigrant groups from southern Europe, Mexico, and Asia brought racial and religious diversity to American cities while clinging to the cultural values and practices of their native countries. By 1920, 13 percent of the American population consisted of first-generation immigrants, with 21.5 percent made up of their children.

Antialien Sentiment

World War I prompted an ideology known as "100-percent Americanism and Americanization," in part to ensure the loyalty of German-Americans and all foreigners during the war. This anti-alien ideology demanded that all immigrants conform to Anglo-American type and abandon their ethnic traditions. This nativist movement contributed to the Red Scare in 1919, to the extreme Ku Klux Klan agitation against African Americans, Jews, and Catholics in the early 1920s, and to the passage of laws restricting immigration, particularly of southern and eastern Europeans and of Asians.

The Family

Revolutionary changes in family behavior led to the rise of a new ideal of family life called the "companionate family." Instead of bolstering the late-Victorian notion of the family as a hierarchical and patriarchal refuge from the hostile world beyond, the new companionate family viewed husbands and wives as "friends and lovers" and parents and children as "pals." The once varied functions of the American family narrowed to the provision of affection for all its members and the nurture and development of children.

Demographics and the Family

Demographic changes framed the emergence of the ideal of the companionate family. By 1920 families were relatively smaller: the median size of all households in the United States fell from 4.7 persons in 1900 to 4.3 in 1920. In addition, in the early decades of the twentieth century the proportion of youths in the population declined: those under age fifteen dropped from 34.4 percent of the population in 1900 to 29.9 percent in 1930. The proportion of youths from ages fifteen to twenty-four also declined from 19.6 percent in 1900 to 18.3 percent in 1930. These shifts meant that there were more adults per youth and less pressure for adolescents to take on adult responsibilities. The youth became more leisured and adults made a greater investment in the nurture of children and adolescents.

Social Institutions and the Family

By 1920 families reoriented their relationship to the social institutions beyond them. The increasingly urban, corporate nature of society by the 1920s meant that the emotional family unit was increasingly separate from other social institutions and freed from direct responsibility to them. The family remained personal, while the workplace and the market became impersonal social environments. But while the family and public spheres split apart, they remained interdependent. The family relied on the productive services of society, while society depended on the family for the expression of emotion and affection. The companionate family's focus on emotional gratification and child nurture prompted efforts to legalize birth control, to permit divorce on the grounds of incompatibility, and to establish programs in marriage counseling, sex education, and child guidance.

The New Woman

The strong, independent, and accomplished "new woman," who entered the American scene at the turn of the twentieth century, gained further character with the passage of the suffrage amendment in 1920. According to Margaret Deland, the new woman "has gone to college, and when she graduates she is going to earn her own living. She declines to be dependent upon a father and mother amply able to support her. She will do settlement work; she won't go to church; she has views upon marriage and the birth-rate, ... she occupies herself passionately, with everything, except the things that used to occupy the minds of girls." The 1920s embellished upon this new woman with the flapper. The term *flapper* was first widely used in Britain after World War I. In the United States in the 1920s, the label was applied to young women who flaunted their freedom from convention and constraint in conduct and dress. Flappers, according to the *Atlantic Monthly* of May 1920, "trot like foxes, limp like lame ducks, one-step like cripples, and all to the barbaric yawp of strange instruments which transform the whole scene into a moving-picture of a fancy ball in bedlam." Whether a young working-class woman, a college graduate, flapper or feminist, the new woman insisted on her right to unrestrained behavior—to drink and smoke in public and to obtain

sexual satisfaction—and in general sought greater personal freedom and equality with men in her social life.

Leisure Activities, Cultural Conflict

In the 1920s money spent on leisure activities such as movies, dances, and sports rose by 300 percent. Prohibition transformed saloons into speakeasies, which got their name from the use of passwords to gain entrance. Many nightclubs had ties to organized crime, and Chicago's Al Capone amassed a fortune by supplying drinkers. New leisure-time pursuits became an arena of cultural conflict. Suddenly, respectable members of the middle class, and middle-class youth especially, partook of amusements formerly associated only with the working and immigrant classes. Young unmarried women who worked in cities increasingly patronized dance halls, amusement parks, and, with an escort, cabarets and nightclubs. Public mingling of sexes, classes, and even ethnic groups challenged older ideas of moral order and resulted in the posting of rules and restrictions to enhance the respectability of these new nightspots.

Dancing

After World War I women in makeup and men with hip flasks demanded "wild" music to dance and were rewarded by songs such as "Alexander's Rag-time Band" by Irving Berlin and jazz music by black musicians. Exuberant new dances from the black tradition included the Black Bottom, the Shimmy, the Varsity Drag, and the Charleston, which was introduced in the 1923 black revue *Runnin' Wild*. Social dancing flourished in new dance halls of the 1920s, in areas of commercial nightlife such as San Francisco's Barbary Coast, New Orleans's French Quarter, and Chicago's South Side. Civic groups sponsored dances at local public facilities; elaborate dance palaces or commercial ballrooms—Roseland and the Savoy in New York, the Trianon and Aragon in Chicago, the Hollywood Palladium in Los Angeles—catered to the dressy set and offered safe settings for young men and women to meet without chaperons.

Fads

Mass communication through radio networks and syndicated news columns enabled new pastimes to catch on as fads quickly in the 1920s, and the decade has been called "fad crazy." Flamboyant 1920s fads included flagpole sitting, goldfish swallowing, dance marathons, crossword puzzles, Mah-Jongg, and the self-improvement teachings of Emile Coué.

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