

All That Jazz: The 1920s

ACT Quality Core Alignment Correlation: D. Challenges at Home and Abroad (ca. 1914-1945): 1. The United States in a Changing World: *b. Describe and evaluate the impact of scientific and technological innovations of the 1920s. c. Identify and evaluate the impact of new cultural movements on American society in the 1920s, d. Identify the characteristics of social conflict and social change that took place in the early 1920s.*

Learning Targets:

- Identify the developments that signaled the end of the Progressive Era.
- Discuss the role of the arts and technology in the development of the national popular culture of the 1920s.
- Describe the scientific contributions in 1920s America, and identify areas where science might not have achieved desired outcomes.
- Understand what the positive and the negative effects were of the 1920s consumer culture.

Chapter Outline:

I. The Decline of Progressive Reform and the Business of Politics

President Calvin Coolidge was an ideal businessman's president. He once reportedly stated, "The man who builds a factory builds a temple, and the man who works there, worships there."

A. Women's Rights After the Struggle for Suffrage

During the decade of the twenties, the women's political movement splintered into a number of groups. The League of Women Voters emerged as a more conservative group that accepted the fiction that political parties were open to women.

In 1923, Alice Paul, at the head of the National Woman's Party, began to work for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution to end state and national laws that discriminated against women. The League opposed the ERA, as did a number of other women's groups, because they argued that it would prohibit special legislative protection for women. Although the ERA was introduced into Congress two decades later and was later submitted to state legislatures for ratification, it has not been ratified.

Women sought public office in the 1920s. Adelina Otero Warren ran as a representative for the U.S. House of Representatives. When the public was informed that she was divorced rather than widowed, she was forced to drop out of the race.

B. Prohibition: The Experiment That Failed

The Eighteenth Amendment prohibited the manufacture or sale of alcohol. The Volstead Act of 1919 established a Prohibition Bureau in the Treasury Department. It was under-budgeted, and the Volstead Act did not outlaw the possession of alcoholic beverages, only their commercial manufacture, sale, and distribution. Alcohol was still legal for medicinal and religious purposes, and people could manufacture alcohol in their private homes.

Prohibition led to the gangster empires of Al Capone and others. Capone alone was making profits of up to \$60 million a year. Merchants were forced to pay protection money, and the profit of the underworld was possibly in excess of \$18 billion per year. In Chicago there were 550 gangland killings in the 1920s.

C. Reactionary Impulses

In May 1920, the South Braintree, Massachusetts paymaster and guard of a shoe company was robbed and murdered. Two men, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants and admitted anarchists, were arrested for the murder. They were brought to trial and convicted of the murder on purely circumstantial evidence. The judge and jury were probably prejudiced to some degree. The story was covered in the Italian newspapers and liberals rallied to their cause. The case dragged on for six years, but the two men were finally executed in 1927.

Congress set the first quota on immigrants with the Emergency Quota Act of 1921. This law cut immigration from 800,000 to 300,000 in a single year. A quota was set on newcomers. Only 3% of the persons of their nationality living in the United States in 1910 were to be admitted. Then, the Johnson-Reid Act of 1924 cut immigration from 3% to 2% and pushed the year back to 1890. This law cut immigrants outside the Western Hemisphere to a mere 165,000 per year.

One of the most reactionary American organizations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the Ku Klux Klan. The first Ku Klux Klan in the United States (founded in 1870) had been regional and had declined in the years after Reconstruction. In 1915, the Klan was reestablished by an ex-Methodist minister named William Simmons. It was then taken over by a Dallas dentist named Hiram Evans. The new Klan grew quickly due to the novel *The Clansman* and its movie version, *The Birth of a Nation*. By the mid-1920s, Klan membership had been estimated at five million. The Klan opposed any challenges to “traditional” values and was open only to white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Women could join only through auxiliaries. Although the Klan of the 1920s could target any minority group, it focused its anger particularly against African Americans, Jews, Catholics, foreigners, and divorcees.

D. Marcus Garvey and the Persistence of Civil Rights Activism

Marcus Garvey, who was born in Jamaica, brought his Universal Negro Improvement Association to New York in 1916. He used modern publicity

techniques, skilled musicians, and a flamboyant pulpit style to build a following of approximately 80,000. He advocated black economic cooperation and founded a chain of grocery stores, the Black Cross Nurses, and the Black Star Steamship Line. He encouraged African Americans to “return to Africa,” but his movement began to fall apart in 1923 when Garvey was convicted of mail fraud in connection with the Black Star Steamship Company. In 1927, after two years in prison, he was deported to Jamaica. The movement was stalled.

E. Warren G. Harding: The Politics of Scandal

According to Frederick Lewis Allen, Warren Gamaliel Harding, a machine-made candidate of the National Republican Party, was not intellectually capable of being an effective president. Lewis notes Harding’s lack of command of the English language; his campaign motto, “Return to Normalcy” evinces his “suffix trouble.” With the exception of three excellent cabinet appointees, Harding brought his friends to Washington and passed out jobs, disregarding qualifications. His Secretary of the Interior, Albert Fall, issued leases to big oil companies in return for \$400,000. Fall went to prison for a year. The head of the Veteran’s Bureau, Charles Forbes, swindled the government out of over \$200 million worth of hospital supplies. Harding met Forbes while he was on vacation in Hawaii. In a similar manner, Harding made his missionary brother-in-law Superintendent of Prisons. Harding died in 1923 while returning from a trip to Alaska just before the numerous scandals connected to his administration became public.

F. Calvin Coolidge: The Hands-Off President

Calvin Coolidge was visiting his father’s Vermont farm when news of Harding’s death arrived. Coolidge’s father, a justice of the peace, administered the presidential oath in the parlor of his farmhouse. Coolidge has been criticized for his lack of presidential leadership and his seeming reluctance to prosecute the scandals of the Harding administration. His administration is known for his hands-off attitude toward big business. In reaction, Senators Robert M. LaFollette and Burton K. Wheeler formed a new Progressive party. The Democrats nominated John Davis for president in 1924. Coolidge ran on the Republican ticket, on the motto of “Keep Cool with Coolidge,” and won the election.

G. Herbert Hoover: The Self-Made President

When Coolidge announced that he did not choose to run for president in 1928, the Republicans turned to Herbert Clark Hoover. Hoover was born of Quaker parentage in West Branch, Iowa. His parents were both dead by the time he was ten-years old, and he was raised in bitter rural poverty by aunts and uncles. He worked his way through Stanford University, and became a mining engineer and a very wealthy man. He headed the Food Administration during World War I and was Secretary of Commerce under Harding. He ran against Democrat Al Smith on the prosperity ticket. Smith came from Irish immigrant parentage, was raised in New York City, and rose to become reform governor of New York. Southern

voters rejected him because of his Catholicism and urban roots, and Hoover was elected president.

II. Hollywood and Harlem: National Cultures in Black and White

During the decade of the 1920s, cultural innovations and creativity centered on the two coasts—in Hollywood on the West Coast and in Harlem on the East Coast.

A. Hollywood Comes of Age

Hollywood films and stars reached an entire generation of Americans in the 1920s and produced our first mass culture. One of the first feature-length films, *The Great Train Robbery*, was produced in 1903, and by the mid-1920s, the film industry grossed \$80 million per week.

Ironically, while Congress was closing its doors to immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Hollywood stars, like Rudolph Valentino from Italy, drew audiences across the United States. Movies in the early 1920s were silent, but in 1927, Al Jolson starred in the first “talkie,” *The Jazz Singer*, the story of a young Jewish man who opposes his parents’ wishes and becomes a jazz singer rather than a cantor.

B. The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a flowering of black culture in the 1920s, including literature, the visual arts, and the performing arts. The outpouring of creativity reflected the cultural heritage and traditions of African Americans. Harlem was an area in upper Manhattan that had become the center of black cultural life, an area that drew artists from all over the United States and the West Indies. Poets like Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes, writers like Zora Neale Hurston, musicians like Ethel Waters, and filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux expressed the “exotic” as well as the revolutionary aspects of African-American culture.

C. Radio and Autos: Transforming Leisure

In November 1920, Pittsburgh station KDKA broadcast news of the Harding landslide. Soon, sports and entertainment were being broadcast into millions of homes. By 1923, there were approximately 500 radio stations in the United States, and by 1927, the National Broadcasting Company was established.

During the 1920s, the car became the transportation of both the rich and the poor. By 1930, Americans owned almost 30 million cars. Henry Ford made the car available for almost all Americans by standardizing parts and creating a truly economical mode of transportation. Fords by the mid-1920s could be bought for as little as \$260.

III. Science on Trial

Scientific projects in the 1920s did not always benefit human beings, and challenges to scientific theories continued to reverberate throughout the twentieth century.

A. The Great Flood of 1927

Engineers began building levees along the Mississippi River in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The levees were intended to allow farmers to settle and farm the rich floodplains of the river. In 1927, torrential rains caused the river to burst across the levees and force more than 900,000 people out of their homes.

B. The Triumph of Eugenics: *Buck v. Bell*

Pseudo-scientific theories of race “proved” that the white race was superior to all others, and that men were intellectually superior to women. Eugenics, a pseudo-scientific discipline consistent with Social Darwinist theories, provided evidence of racial and gender superiority that contributed to immigration restrictions and sterilization laws. Carrie Buck, a teenager who was labeled “feebleminded” because she had borne a child out of wedlock, was sterilized in 1927. The following year, Carrie’s sister, Doris, was also sterilized. By the decade of the 1930s, over 30 states had compulsory sterilization laws.

C. Science, Religion, and the Scopes Trial

Many Americans in the 1920s believed that the teaching of the theory of evolution was responsible for a breakdown in manners and morals. Three states passed laws forbidding the teaching of evolution in their public schools. In March 1925, the Tennessee legislature adopted a measure making it illegal for any public school teacher “to teach any theory” not in accord with the Biblical account of creation. The American Civil Liberties Union offered free legal counsel to any teacher willing to challenge the law. A young biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee accepted the challenge and the stage was set for the infamous “Monkey Trial.” Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100, but the case was appealed and dismissed by a higher court on a technicality.

IV. Consumer Dreams and Nightmares

The United States became a mass consumption society in the 1920s. Americans sought mass-produced pleasure and spent enough to produce the first million-dollar gates at sporting events. Americans went ever deeper into debt, buying new electrical gadgets and consumer products, and even food on “time.”

A. Marketing the Good Life

Advertisers, aided by Madison Avenue, tried to make Americans chronically discontented with their paltry possessions. Americans were conditioned to want more and more. The first advertising and public relations firms appeared before World War I, but they truly became successful in the decade of the twenties. In 1925, Bruce Barton published a best-seller called *The Man Nobody Knows*. Its thesis was that Jesus Christ was the greatest ad-man of all time, a man who “picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world.”

B. Writers and Critics

A number of writers and artists, disgusted with the shallowness and materialism of American culture in the 1920s, chose to live abroad. The poet T.S. Eliot actually became a British citizen and a convert to the Anglican Church. Others, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, kept their U.S. citizenship, but chose to live in places like Paris or the French Riviera, while writing perceptive novels about American life and Americans abroad. Gertrude Stein described the Americans who gathered at her Paris salon as a “lost generation.”

Some writers, known as “debunkers,” chose to remain in the United States. Writers such as Sinclair Lewis wrote about America’s obsession with material gain. In *Main Street*, Lewis describes the stultifying, conformist atmosphere of small-town America.

C. Poverty amid Plenty

Not all Americans were prosperous during the decade of the twenties. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers were especially hit hard, and many chose to join the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union. Industrial workers also suffered in the twenties, as many labor unions had been crushed in the wake of World War I.

D. The Stock Market Crash

In 1925, the market value of all stocks stood at about \$27 billion. By October 1929, the value was up to \$87 billion. As many as nine million Americans were buying stock, and many were buying on margin, or credit. In July 1928, the Federal Reserve tried to slow the inflation of stocks by increasing the interest rate on Federal Reserve notes, but speculation continued, even with rates as high as 20 percent. In September, the Fed tightened credit again. This time the stock market crashed. On Tuesday, October 29, 1929, more than 16 million stocks changed hands. By mid-November the loss in the market value of stocks stood at \$30 billion.

Discussion Questions:

KAGAN Structures: Structures for use in this unit are Think-Pair-Share and Jigsaw. For questions utilizing Think-Pair-Share activities, students will record an answer to the best of their ability, pair with a partner, and share their responses. Students will repeat the Think-Pair-Share a total of three times to obtain various interpretations of the answers from their peers before whole class discussion. For questions utilizing the Jigsaw activity, students will work with their team to answer the section of the question they are assigned. They will develop their answers together as a group and share their answers with other groups to develop a complete response for the full question that will be presented overall to the class.

1. The 1920s have been described as “Janus-faced,” after the Roman god with two faces, one that could see into the past and one that could see into the future. Discuss aspects of the twenties that clung to the past while other aspects looked to the future.
2. Discuss the consumer culture that emerged in the twenties, tracing its impact from the advertising empire of Madison Avenue to Hollywood, Harlem, and major sporting events.

How did technological innovations affect mass consumption and the standardization of American culture?

3. Discuss the presidential politics and political philosophies of the 1920s. What were the cultural implications and outcome of the election of 1928?
4. Discuss the rising tensions between rural and urban and traditional and modern America in the 1920s. Describe how these tensions culminated in the stock market crash of 1929.
5. Describe the onset and the reactions to the onset on the Great Depression. What were the underlying causes of the Depression, and how did Herbert Hoover react to the economic situation?
6. Describe some of the numerous contributions made by African-American writers and artists during the Harlem Renaissance. Was the Harlem Renaissance a true revival of black artistic activity or merely a continuation of a rich tradition?

Significant Themes and Highlights:

1. The decade of the 1920s has been called the first modern decade; however, it was an era of deep division as many Americans sought to connect with and preserve a past era, while other Americans eagerly embraced new manners and mores.
2. While the 1920s are viewed as an era of prosperity, for many Americans the decade was one of depression. Farmers, especially tenant farmers and sharecroppers, were almost immediately plunged into hard times as the world commodities market dropped to new lows. Labor also suffered in the twenties, as strikes were broken and salaries rose very slightly.
3. The decade of the 1920s was characterized by numerous technological advances that linked regions and people across the United States and that contributed to the creation of a mass consumption, standardized culture.
4. The spread of Hollywood-born culture and the outpouring of creativity from Harlem both contributed to the making of a national mass culture.
5. The seeming prosperity of the twenties masked a number of underlying weaknesses in the economy, weaknesses that contributed to the inability of the stock market to recover from the crash of 1929.

Web Site Assignments:

1. Students will locate the Schomburg Collection on the Harlem Renaissance at www2.si.umich.edu/chico/Harlem.

Students then need to click on “Exhibition.”

Each student is to choose one topic from the exhibit on the Harlem Renaissance. There are numerous topics and individuals from which to choose; for example, James Reese Europe, Fletcher Henderson, The Frogs, The Silent Protest Parade, *The Brownie Book*, Zora Neale Hurston, etc.

Students are to write a 1–2-page paper on their chosen topic and then deliver a short synopsis to the class.

2. Students will locate the history of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ku_Klux_Klan, <http://www.kkkklan.com/>, www.splcenter.org, and <http://search.eb.com/blackhistory/micro/329/99.html>.

Students are to read at least two of the links from this site and then write a 2–3-page paper discussing the Klan’s activities in the 1920s.